

The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher

Donyelle C. McCray

In partial fulfillment of the Doctor of Theology Degree

Duke Divinity School

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Date: December 1, 2014

Approved:

Charles L. Campbell, Supervisor

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Susan J. Dunlap

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation consists of a homiletical reading of Julian of Norwich's life and work. While Julian is often classified as a mystic or theologian, she may be better categorized as a preacher in light of contemporary homiletical theory. Julian becomes decipherable as a preacher on a performative level when one attends to the apostolic dimensions of her anchoritic vocation and the particular ways John the Baptist serves as a model for medieval English anchoriticism. Her writings clearly fit within the ambit of the English medieval sermon genre, but censorship likely reduced her audience and contributed to her illegibility as a preacher. Julian displays proclamatory intent through direct statements and by aligning herself with celebrated preachers like Saint Cecelia, Mary Magdalene, and the Apostle Paul. Like Paul, Julian sees Jesus' body as her primary text, places human weakness at the center of her theology, and uses her confined body as a rhetorical tool. Yet, more than anything else love for the church drives her preaching, and this love enables her to connect with her fellow Christians and counter those forces that would silence her. For the contemporary church, Julian bequeaths a liberative example of preaching outside the pulpit. This dissertation concludes with a contemporary example of a figure engaged in such a vocation, the African-American church mother.

To Larry Donnell Stuckey

October 18, 1950-January 9, 2011

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List of Abbreviations

Throughout this dissertation I rely on two primary translations of Julian of Norwich's writings:

"Watson and Jenkins" refers to *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, edited by Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); and

"Spearing" refers to *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love (Short and Long Text)*, translated by Elizabeth Spearing, with an introduction and notes by A.C. Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

I also rely on the thirteenth-century guide to anchoresses:

"*Ancrene Wisse*" refers to *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, translated and introduced by Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, with preface by Benedicta Ward (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

Acknowledgements

I have written the vast majority of this dissertation before a 1978 Polaroid of my godfather, Larry Donnell Stuckey, affectionately known as “Stuckey.” In this photo we are together in my parents’ living room surrounded by a vinyl plant and a velvet portrait of Jesus. I am standing and he’s kneeling so that he can look me (just four years old at the time) in the eye. Stuckey taught me everything I know about the blues, irreverence, defiant laughter, and asking difficult questions. He never missed an opportunity to point out ways the world was off by fifteen degrees. After naming and exegeting one sham or another, he would build toward a crescendo and shout, “It’s rigged! It’s rigged!!”

Even the church was subject to this searching critique. When I told him I felt called to ministry, he smiled and warned me that I was joining “the biggest racket in town.” And yet he had a quiet faith that sustained him in his most ferocious battle. The three years without Stuckey have been mostly winter, and I am still off-kilter by fifteen degrees, a sign, I take it, that he is always with me. This dissertation is dedicated to him.

And yet, there would be no dissertation to dedicate without the extraordinary teachers at Duke Divinity School who have shaped me. These teachers include the Rev. Dr. Esther Acolatse, who teaches pastoral care both inside and outside the classroom with her gentle spirit and deep wisdom, and the Rev. Dr. William C. Turner, Jr., who generously shared one of the most precious gifts a scholar has: time. I am grateful for

his example as a pastor-scholar, for his wealth of insight on teaching homiletics, and for the many questions he put before me to sharpen my analysis. I am also thankful for the Rev. Dr. Lauren F. Winner who has been a blessing to me throughout my program at Duke. It was in her office one February afternoon that I first voiced my plan for this dissertation. Her encouragement in that moment urged me forward. I was propelled still further by Dr. Susan Eastman's inspiring scholarship on the Apostle Paul. Dr. Susan A. Keefe was an invaluable conversation partner on medieval spirituality and served on my dissertation committee until her death in August of 2012.

The current members of my dissertation committee started sowing the seeds for this project long before its proposal stage. Dr. Grace Sujin Pak was my first conversation partner on Julian of Norwich. Her amazing course on medieval women mystics provided the opportunity for close reading and critical reflection. The Rev. Dr. Susan Dunlap's course, "Pastoral Care & Women's Bodies," helped me think about incarnation and ecclesiology in entirely different ways. That course stirred my interest in embodiment and enlarged my vision of what the church can be. Similarly, my interests in the history of preaching and the relationship between preaching and rhetoric were nurtured by the Rev. Dr. Richard Lischer. I began reading his work in my first homiletics course as an M.Div. student at Virginia Theological Seminary, and he has set the coordinates for my odyssey in homiletics. Pursuing this project would have been impossible without these earlier experiences with my committee members. I am all the more grateful to them now as they invest even more in my growth.

I am especially grateful for my dissertation advisor, the Rev. Dr. Charles L. Campbell, for helping me re-imagine Christian proclamation. Our conversations gave me eyes to see Julian's contribution to homiletics, and helped me claim my own voice in the discipline. His gifts of time, energy and insight have been monumental. As a wise preacher once said, "Who could ask for anything more?"¹

Finally, this project would have been exponentially more difficult without the support of the loving community at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, and the prayerful support of Sarah Friday Peters. I have also been continually showered with encouragement from my dear friends, the Rev. Caron Gwynn, the Rev. Dr. Denise Thorpe, Dr. Angelisa Gillyard, and Ms. Geralyn Richard. I am upheld by the three greatest joys of my life: my parents, Karl and Janice McCray, and my brother, Korey.

¹ Eugene Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 115.

Introduction

While having breakfast at a large conference, I mentioned that I was working on this dissertation about Julian of Norwich. One of my dining partners, Benjamin Twinamaani, mentioned that he had heard the name but did not know why she was significant. I explained that Julian witnessed a miraculous vision of Christ while on her deathbed on May 13, 1373, and that the vision consisted of sixteen “showings” that unfolded over the course of a day and a half. I noted that the visions filled Julian with so much joy that she felt convinced they were intended for the entire church, and she was determined to share them despite power dynamics designed to silence women and the laity. I also explained that at some point Julian became an anchoress, meaning she voluntarily confined herself to a cell in the church in order to devote herself to a life of prayer and proclamation. I do not remember whether I mentioned the titles of her works. What I do remember is Benjamin’s response. “Quality control,” he said, “She sounds like quality control—one of those people whose job is to test and see whether what the church does in worship is real or not” (Benjamin Twinamaani, personal communication, July 2, 2013).

The notion of Julian as quality control has grown on me. It counters the dreary image of Julian huddling in the shadows or the tired portrayal of yet another woman whose holiness is rooted in docility. “Quality control” captures the prophetic tenor flowing through Julian’s life and work and suggests that she has something in common with the biblical prophets who offered words of grace, edified the faithful, and stood on the periphery proclaiming visions from on high. In other words, the term “quality

control” points to the preacher in Julian. And it is precisely this dimension of Julian’s life that sits at the center of this dissertation.

The description of Julian as a preacher may spark surprise. She never describes herself as a preacher and her name rarely appears on lists of medieval preachers.² One is much more likely to find names like John Wycliff, John Tauler, Meister Eckhart and Robert of Basevorn. These men were considered the bona fide preachers of the day because they had all the authorizing credentials: formal training, established pulpits, presumption of virtue, maleness, and commitment to the institutional power structures of the church. By contrast, Julian was in an anchorhold with more contemporary authorizing criteria: zeal for the church, joy burning within, and a message of God’s love.³ She eventually penned two written works, *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*, and while both inspired the faithful, they did not immediately make her legible as a preacher.

In part, this illegibility stems from a long struggle to classify Julian. In the world of English literature, Julian is held up as an author and celebrated as the first woman to

² Julian is not included in a number of recent histories of preaching, including O.C. Edwards’ *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004); Hughes Oliphant Olds’ *The Reading and Preaching of Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), Paul Scott Wilson’s *Concise History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), and Yngve Brilioth’s *A Brief History of Preaching*, trans. Karl E. Mattson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965). Understandably, Edwards, Olds, Wilson, and Brilioth make it clear that their histories are selective rather than exhaustive. Yet, Julian is included in Eunjo Mary Kim’s *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice Through the Ages* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 61-67.

³ My reference to contemporary authorizing criteria rests largely on Christine Smith’s comment on authority for preaching. She says, “For many, preaching is not so much a matter of the right and privilege of the position with all of its distinctive power; rather it is a craft of authenticity weaving together mutuality, solidarity, and deeper faith sharing.” Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 47.

write a book in English. Alternatively, Denys Turner makes a compelling case for categorizing Julian as a theologian. Turner compares Julian to Bonaventure and Duns Scotus and sees her as a systematic theologian in the monastic sense of that term.⁴ Kevin Magill offers helpful nuance by thinking of her as a visionary.⁵ Like Turner, Magill discerns Julian's goal of educating her audience, but Magill also senses that she is trying to provoke a fundamental change in the way her audience sees the world. In other words, Magill sees Julian pointing to the limits of human perception and urging the church to trust in God's vision for humankind.⁶

Magill and Turner challenge the longstanding notion of Julian as a "mystic," a title for individuals who have unusually profound experiences of God that cannot be fully articulated. Restlessness around this label is reasonable because the mystic title is also assigned to people who have influenced the church in significant ways but are for a variety of reasons utterly unclassifiable. To be a mystic is to be held in the holiest of junk drawers. While I see great pedagogical value in this nebulous status, there seems to be a much more fitting category for Julian: preacher. Her texts and life story portray a woman deeply engaged in a vocation of preaching the gospel. This core identity is not in conflict with notions of Julian as theologian or visionary. It is more a matter of

⁴ Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 10. Turner describes Julian's work as "remarkably self-conscious methodologically" and says, "Her Revelation is riddled with sic et non, with theological tensions . . . Restless inquiry dominates the rhetoric of her work—assertion is repeatedly followed by objection, indicating a refusal to be intellectually satisfied." Ibid., 11.

⁵ Kevin Magill, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic or Visionary?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-2.

⁶ Ibid., 2-3.

emphasis. Yet the distinction has significant implications for Christian proclamation and for the field of homiletics.

Aims of the Dissertation

My aim in this dissertation is to make Julian decipherable as a preacher of the gospel and to interrogate those frameworks that would readily dismiss her. My task involves sketching out the contours of anchoritic proclamation and situating Julian within the medieval preaching tradition. On one level I am making an historical argument about Julian. I am arguing that she deserves more attention in the history of preaching. She offers a desperately needed story of preaching from the periphery of the church during an era when it seemed that only those within the centralized power structures counted. Her story is an important one because homiletics is itself in a nascent form during her lifetime. She is being written into the margins of history even as she begins to speak, and despite considerable fluidity in sermon genre and in conceptions of the preaching task. Julian's story challenges the master narrative of homiletics with another historical perspective—one that de-centers the pulpit and acknowledges the great cloud of witnesses who preach the gospel through other means. While this project leans heavily on history, it is not purely historical. It is best classified as a hybrid because I consider both medieval history and contemporary homiletical theory in making my argument.

A second dimension of this project involves power dynamics. Making Julian legible as a preacher requires an examination of the web of censorship and tradition she

negotiates. In fact, this study of Julian as preacher reveals that censorship is an essential part of her story and she is a master at navigating it. She has much to offer contemporary North American preachers in this regard because, with rare exception, preaching remains a highly censored exercise and a means of instantiating power in the church. However, in this project I am less interested in deconstructing repressive forces and more interested in the kind of preaching that emerges precisely because the pulpit can be so confining. In other words, I am interested in the fruit of the censored pulpit. I see these forms of preaching as essential to the life of the church and want to see them flourish.

It is also important to note at the outset that the nature of this project resists a wooden approach to homiletics. Throughout this dissertation, I use “proclamation” with a good deal of elasticity and see it as a term that embraces a wide range of speech-acts intended to declare the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. Proclamation, then, would include the street evangelist passing out tracts next to a busy subway station, the graffiti artist who paints a flowering cross on an interstate overpass, the nuns marching for peace, and the live nativity scene situated in a rural pasture. Proclamation would also cover the clergyperson preaching in the context of the traditional Sunday liturgy. In this dissertation, I emphasize the common pool out of which all these various modes of proclamation emerge. And yet, I am not simply arguing that Julian proclaimed the gospel in the broad sense of the term; I am arguing that she preached the gospel. My understanding of “preaching” evolves as a result of my study of Julian and in this

dissertation I use the term in two ways. Out of necessity, I use the term to describe the act of delivering a “sermon:”

a speech delivered in a Christian assembly for worship by an authorized person that applies some point of doctrine, usually drawn from a biblical passage, to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it.⁷

This usage is in keeping with common understandings of the terms “preaching” and “sermon.” However, I come to see preaching as drawing others into the extravagance of the gospel-- its joy, horror and inscrutability. This effort does not require a pulpit, a formal liturgy or traditional authorization in order to constitute preaching. However, a discernible intent to share the gospel is critical. I work to make my intentions clear when I use the terms “preaching,” “proclamation,” and “sermon.”

Scope of the Dissertation

Julian’s broad appeal has put her at the center of a number of conversations about gender, anchoriticism, and Christian spirituality. One central question revolves around the gender dynamics of anchoriticism and the ways the practice may be interpreted as feeding on women’s internalized oppression. My research has led me to take a more benevolent view of anchoriticism. While I address gender dynamics in this study and I regularly refer to scholars who do feminist literary readings of Julian’s work, I maintain my focus on Christian preaching in order to ground the project in homiletics.

⁷ O.C. Edwards, 3-4.

Accordingly, this project should be seen as a homiletical reading of Julian's life and work rather than a study of gender dynamics in the medieval English church.

Anchoriticism also raises some simply fascinating questions about incarceration and preaching. These questions emerged as I began to see the correlations between the ministries of Julian and the Apostle Paul. The fact that Julian's confinement is voluntary and Paul's is involuntary only increases the intrigue. I would like to learn more about other prophets who might be among the roughly ten million people who are currently incarcerated globally.⁸ I am eager to explore the relationship between proclamation and incarceration in another project but this dissertation focuses on Julian of Norwich.⁹

Of course, Julian has a remarkable impact on Christian spirituality and on major figures within the discipline. Some of the best interpreters of Julian's work are contemplatives like Evelyn Underhill and Thomas Merton who see her as an "inner companion."¹⁰ I make occasional references to contemplative interpreters, but this dissertation is not an analysis of her influence on the contemplative tradition. This project is an examination of Julian's Christian witness and the implications for the field of homiletics.

⁸ Roy Walmsley, *World Prison Population List*, Tenth Edition (London: International Centre for Prison Studies, 2013), 1.

⁹ For example, in the case of Martin Luther King, Jr. it seems clear that the repeated experience of being jailed impacted his preaching in multiple ways.

¹⁰ Merrill Ware Carrington, "A Final Test of Holiness" (address presented at the annual Evelyn Underhill Society Quiet Day, "Becoming the Parent of New Life," Washington, DC, June 15, 2013).

Selected Translations

There is a flourishing conversation among Julian scholars concerning the proper translation of her work. I chose to focus on two texts by highly respected Julian scholars. The first of these is Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins' edition of Julian's work in Middle English, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*.¹¹ This edition is suitable for scholars of Middle English and is intended for readers interested in serious study. While Watson and Jenkins also seek to appeal to readers without a background in Middle English, I found it more convenient to use a modern English translation for these readers. I chose Elizabeth Spearing's translation because Spearing has been celebrated for honoring Julian's voice without simplifying her thought.¹² The reader will notice that Spearing's edition is noticeably smoother. Watson and Jenkins preserve the variations in Julian's spelling and capitalization even when these irregularities occur in the same line or paragraph.

Since translation and hermeneutics work in tandem to some degree, these translations have some bearing on my reading of Julian's life and work overall. I am interested in the debates around Julian's identity, particularly her life prior to becoming an anchoress, the dating of her written works, and her age at death. Yet, I felt it necessary to dedicate the chapters of this dissertation to my argument about her role in

¹¹ Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). Hereinafter, "Watson and Jenkins."

¹² *Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love (Short Text and Long Text)*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing and intro. A.C. Spearing (London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 1998). Hereinafter, "Spearing."

the history of preaching. I offer a sketch of Julian in Appendix A which explains where I land on some of the central debates about Julian's life and work. Similarly, I provide some background on anchoriticism as practiced in medieval England in Appendix B.

Chapter Summaries

I nurse a set of under-riding questions throughout this project. First, given that relatively little has been written about anchoritic proclamation, what are the contours of anchoritic preaching and what are its specific features? Second, what does Julian's legacy of anchoritic proclamation offer to the contemporary church? What new approaches emerge from studying her example and what assumptions are challenged? A third set of questions concerns power: How might Julian be a resource for negotiating contemporary power dynamics that effectively censor the pulpit? And further, how does Julian's example de-center the pulpit and highlight the value of lay proclamation in its myriad forms?

I begin in Chapter One with an examination of Julian's anchoritic vocation and its apostolic roots. I find that the primary model for anchorites is none other than John the Baptist. I survey some of England's most celebrated anchorites and explore the ways they deliberately associate themselves with John. I also examine the two primary rhetorical spheres of anchoriticism -the frontier and the grave- and trace them back to John the Baptist. Ultimately, I argue that anchoriticism is tantamount to a lifelong public performance of the gospel. This performance is influenced by John's example.

Thus, Julian is engaged in a prophetic vocation—one that grows out of the tradition of prophets like Elijah and John the Baptist and has preaching at its core.

In Chapter Two I situate Julian's works, *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love* in context to get further clarity on her voice as a preacher of the gospel. This move requires attention to two intertwined issues: genre and power. First, I address questions of genre and describe the varieties of written works that were considered sermonic during Julian's era. Then, I turn to the particular challenges Julian faces as one using the vernacular during a period when vernacular texts are suspect and subject to censorship by the institutional church. One strategy Julian employs involves aligning herself with Saint Cecelia and Saint Mary Magdalene. I point out the ways these associations amount to claiming a form of apostolic authority. I also explore another strategy Julian uses—that of disclaiming authority. I argue that her disavowal has the net effect of solidifying her authority to proclaim the gospel. I lean on these rhetorical strategies as a means of discerning Julian's intent for her writings, and I find that Julian aims to proclaim Christ's love for the church despite the obstacles she faces as a woman using the vernacular.

Chapter Three focuses on the crucial role of the body for Julian. Like the Apostle Paul, Julian has an embodied understanding of the gospel that is reflected in her approach to text, in her theology, and in performance. I explore the way Julian uses Jesus' body as her central text, exegeting it as one might exegete scripture, and I point to the Pauline precedent for this approach. Embodiment sits at the foundation of

Julian's theology as well as Paul's. I discuss this significance and hone in on the fact that both use tactility and the grotesque to highlight human weakness. I turn to an additional parallel at the level of performance where I note the techniques Julian and Paul use to make their physically incarcerated bodies present to audiences in their written works. Here, I also introduce Judith Butler as a conversation partner to reflect on the body's role as a rhetor.

In Chapter Four, "Preacher as Lover," I argue that Julian relies on erotic authority, a concept introduced by a secular theorist, Audre Lorde. First, I define erotic authority and explain Audre Lorde's rationale for using the term. Then, I explain its relevance to Christian preaching. I go on to explore Julian's reliance on erotic authority and delve into her use of courtly love imagery. I reflect on the reasons why the archetype of the lover serves her goals for preaching and conclude that the lover archetype helps Julian negotiate censorship and underscores the extravagance of the gospel message. I examine the biblical precedent Julian has for this approach in the Virgin Mary. As it turns out, the Virgin Mary's wailing at the foot of the cross was considered preaching by some medieval Christians. I draw parallels between Julian and Mary and conclude that Julian embraces a Marian form of authority in preaching.

Chapter Five takes a form that differs from the preceding chapters. Having outlined my argument about Julian's place in the history of preaching, I turn to a contemporary figure who captures the spirit of Julian's approach to preaching. I find this example in the archetype of the African-American church mother and provide a

sketch of her mode of preaching. Here, I do not suggest flat imitation of Julian because the history of the Black Church and the intertwined dynamics of race, gender, and age are clearly more influential. Instead, I argue that the church mother advances the hallmarks of anchoritic preaching and is in keeping with Julian's vision of preaching. The limited research on church mothers requires that I consider a range of women, both fictional (though not ahistorical) and actual. My aim is not to offer a comprehensive historical analysis of the church mother but rather to point out the possibilities in the role. I am interested in the ways the church mother speaks to the continuing relevance of anchoritic theology despite the end of anchoriticism.

Overall, I assert that Julian of Norwich is a central figure in the history of Christian preaching with continuing relevance to contemporary homiletics. This dissertation outlines the biblical and theological foundations for her preaching and also examines the way censorship influenced her efforts. In the end, this project presents Julian as a symbol of the rich preaching that takes place in the shadow of the pulpit.

Chapter One

A Prophetic Vocation

“John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

Mark 6: 16 NRSV

Introduction

The following portrait of John, a fifteenth century anchorite at Westminster Abbey, provides one of the best descriptions of a recluse:

For sixty years he had been immured. Those who conversed with him (but of late his discourse was wild) saw through an iron grating a long, bent figure, with white hair and white beard reaching to his waist. His face was like the face of some corpse which had escaped corruption—so thin, so white, so sunken it was; but for the gleaming of his eyes one would have thought him the figure of Death as he is painted in the cloister of Paul's. He was reckoned a very holy person.¹

The full description of John resonates with the biblical portrait of John the Baptist. John of Westminster lives in a remote part of the Abbey which is a metaphorical desert in itself; John the Baptist lives in the desert of Judea.² John of Westminster's 'wild' discourse is copied down so it might be repeated, rather like John the Baptist's rough message of repentance. John of Westminster draws the attention of King Richard; John the Baptist catches the ear of King Herod.³ Both Johns know something about iron bars,

¹ Walter Besant, *Westminster*, with an Etching by Francis S. Walker, R.P.E. and 130 Illustrations by William Patten and Others (London: Chatto & Windus, 1895), 103-104. John was believed to be so holy that King Richard sought his counsel and many others sought his prayers. Rotha Mary Clay even shares a story of a deceased nun coming in spirit to request John of Westminster's intercessions. Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 154.

² Besant, 6. Besant notes that John's cell is on the "south side of the Infirmary Cloister," and at a distance from most of the other cells. *Ibid.*, 108.

³ *Ibid.*, 104.

though one looks out of an anchorite's cell and one looks out from a prison cell.⁴ Both Johns are noticeably disinterested in contemporary fashion.⁵

It is unclear whether the unnamed monk describing John of Westminster has John the Baptist in the back of his mind, but it would be entirely reasonable if he did.⁶ Over the centuries John the Baptist is raised a thousand times over in the lives of hermits and anchorites like John of Westminster. His influence on them easily exceeds that of Judith, Anna, and Paul of Thebes, and only Mary and Christ himself get more attention.⁷ John the Baptist's profound influence on anchoriticism makes it a prophetic vocation.

The description of anchoriticism as a prophetic vocation may startle those who tend to imagine the apostolic life and the contemplative life as polar opposites. In actuality, the two form one indivisible unit. Apostolic ministry does not begin when one opens her mouth to speak and end upon closing it. Those who confine apostolic ministry to the oral realm misread it and similarly limit the contemplative. As Thomas Merton explains, the function of contemplation is not to prepare us for apostolic work

⁴ Ibid.; Matthew 14:3 NRSV.

⁵ Ibid., 103; Matthew 3:4, Mark 1:6.

⁶ It is notable that the monk compares John of Westminster to St. Antony who is both an anchorite pioneer and a wilderness prophet in the tradition of Elijah. Antony, "used to tell himself that from the career of the great Elijah, as from a mirror, the ascetic must always acquire knowledge of his own life." Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 37.

⁷ Christopher J. Holdsworth, "Christina of Markyate," in *Medieval Women: Dedicated and Presented to Professor Rosalind M.T. Hill on the Occasion of Her Seventieth Birthday*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia, Vol. I, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 236; Dee Dyas, "'Wilderness is Anlich lif of Ancre Wununge': The Wilderness and Medieval Anchoritic Spirituality," in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden and Roger Ellis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 26.

or serve as respite when we have completed it; only a corrupted form of contemplation would have ulterior motives.⁸ Instead, the desert is the place where apostles are most fully themselves and it represents the inseparability of contemplative and apostolic life.⁹

No figure embodied this unity between the apostolic and contemplative realms more than the anchoress. In this chapter I argue that anchoriticism was a prophetic vocation because it amounted to a continual public performance of the gospel. First, I introduce the embodied form of rhetoric that undergirds anchoriticism. Second, I describe the ways its primary forbear, John the Baptist, influenced the vocation. I gather voices from many of the texts written expressly for anchorites and note the ways John is presented as a model. Then, I turn to some of the most famous English anchorites and comment on the pains they take to associate themselves with John. In the latter part of the chapter I explore the two dominant rhetorical spheres of anchoriticism- the frontier and the grave- and I argue that John's silhouette shapes them.

Signs and Portents

Perhaps the manifold dimensions of the desert are best summarized by St. Basil when he encourages his disciple, Chilo, in solitary life. Basil offers him an internal "response" or a rhetorical weapon for fighting the doubts that would inevitably arise:

I am living, O evil thought, in the desert in which the Lord lived. Here is the oak of Mamre; here is the ladder going up to heaven, and the stronghold of the angels which

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 260.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Jacob saw; here is the wilderness in which the people purified received the law, and so came into the land of promise and saw God. Here is Mount Carmel where Elias sojourned and pleased God. Here is the plain whither Esdras withdrew, and at God's bidding uttered all the God inspired books. Here is the wilderness in which the blessed John ate locusts and preached repentance to men. Here is the Mount of Olives, whither Christ came and prayed, and taught us to pray. Here is Christ the lover of the wilderness, for He says "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them." "Here is the strait and narrow way which leadeth unto life." Here are the teachers and prophets "wandering in deserts and in mountains and in dens and caves of the earth." Here are apostles and evangelists and solitaires' life remote from cities. This I have embraced with all my heart, that I may win what has been promised to Christ's martyrs and all His other saints, and so I may truly say, "Because of the words of thy lips I have kept hard ways." I have heard of Abraham, God's friend, who obeyed the divine voice and went into the wilderness . . . of John the rebuker of adultery, beheaded; of Christ's martyrs slain.¹⁰

While John is not the only biblical model, his double reference is significant. He is the premiere model for solitary life. It is important to briefly explain just how John is a model because the accent is not on what he says, but who he is and what he does.¹¹ John's message cannot be reduced to his words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."¹² John himself is the beacon, a living, breathing sign. Similarly, the

¹⁰ Saint Basil, *The Treatise de Spiritu Sancto: The Nine Homilies of the Hexaemeron and the Letters of Saint Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2d Series, Vol. VIII, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 146.

¹¹ The performative dimensions here will be discussed more fully in subsequent chapters.

¹² Matthew 3:2 NRSV.

medieval anchoress' proclamation is performative. She is a portent and John is a model for her because of the efficacy of his life-as-argument.¹³

In medieval England, John the Baptist was an especially compelling figure because proclamation did not merely rest on verbal rhetoric.¹⁴ Gospel proclamation did not require a pulpit or even a verbal message, and there was biblical precedent for this approach. Who can forget Isaiah walking naked for three years as a sign and portent? Or who can forget the drama of watching Ezekiel lie on his right side for 390 days straight and then forty days on his left?¹⁵ Jesus' cleansing of the temple follows this model of enacting a message. In this sense, his greatest sermon is not the one given on the mount but the one he preached hanging silently on the cross.¹⁶

The anchoress accepted this public ministry of proclamation and was encouraged to see herself as a sign that pointed others to the cross. Yet her ability to signal was compromised if she failed to model Christian virtue. One guide for anchoresses, *Ancrene Wisse*, pulsates with fear of sin and scandal and urges the anchoress to remain on guard. The anxiety throughout this text is a reminder that she lives under the strictest measure of Christian scrutiny: "Night and day you are up on

¹³ James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 293. Murphy explains, "The life of the preacher is important as part of his appeal to his audience."

¹⁴ Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Place, Space and Body in Anchoritic Rhetoric" in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 7-9.

¹⁵ Isaiah 20:1-4, Ezekiel 4:1-13 NRSV.

¹⁶ Susan A. Keefe, email message to author, March 17, 2012.

God's Cross." ¹⁷ Thus, she must give attention to her schedule of prayers, to who visits and how long. She must avoid offending others and cannot complain. Absolute sexual purity is, of course, indispensable. The guide's anxiety underscores the idea that the anchoress is living much like another group of solitaires: the Stylites. Thus, the one thing the stone walls do *not* offer the anchoress is privacy.¹⁸ The walls function like a platform and remind her of her very public endeavor of proclaiming Christ. Instead of hiding the anchoress, the anchorhold puts her on display as a living word to the community.

Lest there be any doubt about the public nature of the anchoress' proclamation, *Ancrene Wisse* tells the anchoress that the stone anchorhold has merged with her body. The windows are her eyes, its dank smell her nose, and the stone walls are her very flesh.¹⁹ She was to see herself as a visible and tangible sign of the divine, a living stone mortared into a spiritual temple.²⁰

Along this line it is important to note that a holy life functioned not only as a form of proclamation, but also as first-order preaching. While this dimension of

¹⁷ *Ancrene Wisse*, 29, 176. As part of a reflection on the hierarchy of penance, *Ancrene Wisse* also discusses those who are "hung at their own desire on Jesus' cross." Ibid., 176-178.

¹⁸ Indeed, privacy might even induce her to sin. Michelle M. Sauer provides a thoughtful reflection on the role of privacy in anchoritic life. Michelle M. Sauer, "Privacy, Exile and the Rhetoric of Solitude in the Medieval English Anchoritic Tradition," in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008): 96-110.

¹⁹ In their introduction to *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson discuss the anchoress' overlapping bodies. *Ancrene Wisse*, 24-25. This fluidity is explored further in Part II: Outer Senses and Part III: Inner Feelings. In reference to the anchoress' eyes, the guide says, "People would shut fast every window of the house if they could shut death out of it, [the death of the body]- and an anchoress will not enclose her eye-windows against the death of the soul?" *Ancrene Wisse*, 70.

²⁰ 1 Peter 2:5.

preaching has murky borders in contemporary mainline homiletics, there was considerable agreement on its importance in medieval homiletics. The *artes praedicandi* teaching manuals consistently affirm its significance.²¹ A holy life was a non-negotiable foundation for any additional mode of proclamation the preacher might attempt.²²

John's Presence in Anchoritic Rules

There are thirteen extant anchoritic "rules," or non-binding guides for recluses, and of these some are brief letters and others quite lengthy.²³ These guides were heavily consulted and read in community, meaning they were passed from cell to cell. John's appearance in these texts and others concerning solitary life is notable and suggests he was a premiere model, a person authors turned to when they needed to offer an example for anchoritic life.

One of the first to make such a reference is Goscelin of St. Bertin, who holds John in awe. Goscelin wrote the *Book of Encouragement and Consolation* around 1083 for Eva, a recluse and good friend. Caught up in a moment of praise, Goscelin points to John as a sign of the surpassing greatness of God:

²¹ Humbert of Romans directs a considerable portion of his treatise to the preacher's conduct while the form of the sermon receives less attention. Phyllis Roberts, "The 'Ars Praedicandi' and the Medieval Sermon," in *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 47. Helen Leith Spencer notes the centrality of the preacher's example from the perspective of the audience, saying "manner of life was itself a sermon without words," and cites a cleric who "would willingly present benefices in his diocese to half a dozen or so foreign priests. Even though these men could not speak a word of English, they would still preach by example." Helen Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 99.

²² Spencer, 99.

²³ Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 294-298.

Who can understand the mercy of the Lord? It is a miracle, a worthy spectacle not for men alone but for all the celestial powers! The Baptist trembled and did not dare to touch Christ's sacred head—the Baptist, than whom none greater would arise among those borne of woman . . . How great are you, Lord, and yet how small, how mighty and meek, how exalted and humble! Your own Baptist, the most holy among men, even greater than a prophet, does not dare touch you . . .”²⁴

In her quest for holiness, Goscelin makes it clear that Eva has an incomparable mentor in John. And yet, Goscelin goes even further by situating her in John's legacy:

John, the precursor of the Lord, was a burning and glowing lamp, crying in the wilderness as the voice that preceded the Word of God: 'Make straight the way of the Lord.' In becoming an anchoress, you have joined his family, whom the Church celebrates with this hymn:

Tender in years, you sought out the caves of the desert,
Fleeing the busy throng of the cities,
Lest with just one thoughtless word you might
 Stain your life.
A camel furnished your hairy clothing,
And oxen a belt for your sacred limbs,
Water you drink, and for your repast
 Honey and locusts.
O happy you are, and your merits outstanding:
You know not the ice-cold snowfall of shame;
Eminent martyr who sought out solitude,
 Greatest of prophets.
Some get a crown for their thirty-fold harvest;
Others, a double crown for sixty-fold harvest;
You, for your hundredfold increase, with triple
garland,
 They crown as a saint.²⁵

²⁴ Monika Otter, *Goscelin of St. Bertin: The Book of Encouragement and Consolation* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 126-127.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

Goscelin makes it clear that John is the preeminent model for solitary life and comparable to a patriarch for recluses. As additional guides are written for anchorites, it becomes clear that Goscelin is not alone in his reading of John's role.

In the twelfth century, Aelred of Rievaulx writes a rule of life for his beloved sister, a recluse. In it he invites her to meditate on a cherished scene in scripture:

But now together with your most sweet Lady go up into the mountains and gaze upon the barren wife and the virgin as they embrace one another and exchange those greetings in which the little servant recognized and hailed with unspeakable joy his Lord, the herald recognized the Judge, the voice the Word, the one enclosed in the womb of his aged mother, the other confined in the Virgin's womb.²⁶

Guided meditations like this one compose the very heart of Aelred's rule. The meditations are intended to ground the anchoress in her vocation, tie her practices to the biblical tradition, and provide an experience of unity with God.

In another instance, Aelred takes the Nativity of John the Baptist as an opportunity to preach about solitary life. His sermon presents two glowing examples, Elijah from the Old Testament and, predictably, John the Baptist from the New Testament.²⁷ Aelred explains, "in the life of Saint John Baptist . . . the Lord shows us

²⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Treatises, Pastoral Prayer*, with an introduction by David Knowles (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 81.

²⁷ John Sommerfeldt, *Aelred of Rievaulx, On Love and Order in the World and the Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2006), 70.

what the life of solitaries ought to be.”²⁸ It is hard to imagine how Aelred could be clearer about John’s role as an exemplar.

We can find a third example in *The Fire of Love*, a fourteenth-century text authored by a hermit, Richard Rolle.²⁹ In this case, John comes to mind as Rolle reflects on his own life and recounts a cherished line from the book of Job, “Who has let the wild ass free and loosed her bonds?”³⁰ The line seems to have sentimental value because it spurs an ode to freedom centering on John the Baptist:

Forsooth John Baptist, after Christ the prince of hermits,
tarrying in no desire, chose a solitary life; and others have
also chosen it, like to a bresse, the which, says Solomon,
has no leader or commander, and goes forth by companies
of gifts and virtues.³¹

Rolle seems to be motivated by both honor and affection when he describes John as the “prince of hermits.” The figure of the “bresse” or locust is a jovial poke at John’s famous diet. By coupling playfulness and royal imagery, Rolle secures John’s seat on the pedestal for the reader.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Richard Rolle’s *The Fire of Love* is a set of reflections on solitary life and not an anchoritic rule in the narrow sense. *The Fire of Love* is included here because of its influence and because Rolle also authored an anchoritic rule, *The Form of Living*. Richard Rolle, *The English Writings*, trans., ed., and intro. Rosamund S. Allen, pref. Valerie M. Lagorio (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988).

³⁰ Job 39:5; Richard Rolle of Hampole, *The Fire of Love, or Melody of Love and The Mending of Life, or Rule of Living*, trans. Richard Misyn and ed. Frances M. M. Comper, intro. Evelyn Underhill (London: Methuen, 1914), 63-64.

³¹ Ibid. The editor compares the “bresse” to a gadfly or locust.

As the consensus builds, one might think that *Ancrene Wisse*, the most widely circulated anchoritic text, presents a counterargument to the notion of anchoriticism as a prophetic vocation. After all, the guide seems to discourage preaching:

Do not preach to anyone. Let no man ask you counsel or talk to you; advise only women. St. Paul forbade women to preach: *Mulieres non permitto docere* (1 Timothy 2:12). Do not criticize any man, nor blame him for his vices unless he is over-familiar with you.³²

This passage is more ambiguous than it seems, however, and three points are helpful here. First, this directive is situated in a rather lengthy discourse on speech and its pitfalls for the recluse. The guide assumes she is in regular dialogue with lay and ordained members of her community and offers a few helpful suggestions. Second, a close reading strongly suggests the primary issues are adherence to prescribed gender roles and respect for orthodoxy. The guide wants the anchoress to avoid the conflict and judgment that would surely result if she challenged male authority. In particular, major tensions would arise if she were seen as competing with clerics or arguing with them. This issue leads to the third point: The stakes are higher for the anchoress precisely because she is engaged in a vocation of public proclamation. Hers is a performance-based proclamation, but public nevertheless, and *Ancrene Wisse* wants to protect the anchoress from any unnecessary scrutiny or condemnation. In short, *Ancrene Wisse* wants the anchoress to mind the power dynamics. This mindfulness does not prevent her vocation from being a prophetic one, nor does it keep John the Baptist from being a model. *Ancrene Wisse* still presents John as prototype:

³² *Ancrene Wisse*, 75.

St. John the Baptist, of whom our Lord said, *Inter natos mulierum non surrexit maior Johanne baptista* (Matthew 11:11) – that “among the sons of women there never arose a greater” – teaches us openly by his own deed that a solitary place is both more secure and more profitable. For though the angel Gabriel had foretold his birth, and though he was filled with the Holy Spirit at once, within his mother’s womb, though he was born through a miracle from a barren woman and in his birth unloosed his father’s tongue into prophecy: for all this, he still did not dare to live among people, so fear-inspiring he found life there, even taking only speech into account. So what did he do? ‘Young in years he fled away into the wilderness, lest with speech he should sully his pure life.’ . . . And what profit did he find there? His profit was so great that he baptized God. O how sublime a thing, that he held under his hands in baptism the Lord of heaven, who holds up the whole world with his own power! There all the Holy Trinity (the ‘threeness’ in English) showed itself to him, the Father through his voice, the Holy Spirit in the likeness of a dove, the Son under his hands (Matthew 3:13-17). In his solitary life he found three preeminent things: the privilege of a preacher, the merit of martyrdom, the reward of a virgin. These three kinds of people have in heaven crown after crown, with an overflowing reward. And the blessed John in his solitary place earned all these three estates just for himself.³³

Here, the Triple Crown is not only a sign of heavenly honor, but also a seal on his mentorship for anchoresses. His example might also be at work on another level. The anchoress is cautioned to expect scorn and hostility as an inevitable result of her vocation. The guide may be alluding to John’s ministry in the way these challenges are presented as inevitable:

If you bark back, you have a dog’s nature; if you sting back, you have an adder’s nature, and not that of Christ’s spouse. Think if he did so, *Qui tanquam ovis ad*

³³ *Ancrene Wisse*, 107-108.

occisionem ductus est et non aperuit os suum (Isaiah 53:7); after all the shameful tortures that he suffered on the long night of Good Friday, they led him out in the morning to hang him on a criminal's gallows, and to drive iron nails through his four limbs—but '*No more than a sheep*,' as the Holy Writ says, '*did he struggle or speak*.'³⁴

Might the reference to the adder be a veiled allusion to John's ministry given that he called the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers?"³⁵ Either way, *Ancrene Wisse* seems quite mindful of the prophetic nature of anchoritic life and the value of John's example.³⁶

One might see a counterargument in the fact that some texts written for anchorites do not mention John the Baptist, but I am not arguing that John is the only example for anchoritic life. I argue that he is the most prominent and that the vocation is a prophetic one. That said, often those anchoritic texts that do not mention John explicitly do so implicitly. For instance, *Speculum Inclusorum*, an anonymous fifteenth-century guide, points to Elijah as a model for prayer.³⁷ Further, *Speculum Inclusorum* is part of a group of five texts that either draw on or directly recommend Aelred's guide—the text mentioned above that presents such a radiant view of John.³⁸ Moreover, even Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, a text that sits outside the Aelred family, counsels the anchorite by weaving together lines from a medley of prophets. When reading the

³⁴ *Ancrene Wisse*, Part III, Inner Feelings, 94; Psalm 22:16, Luke 3:7, and Matthew 12:34, 23:33 NRSV.

³⁵ Matthew 3:7 and Luke 3:7 NRSV. *Ancrene Wisse* may also be referring to Christ here since he calls scribes and Pharisees a "brood of vipers" in Matthew 23:33 NRSV.

³⁶ Elijah is also presented as a model to the anchoress and provides another example of this prophetic emphasis. *Ancrene Wisse*, 178-179.

³⁷ E.A. Jones, ed., *Speculum Inclusorum, A Mirror for Recluses: A Late-Medieval Guide for Anchorites and its Middle English Translation* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 45.

³⁸ In addition to the *Speculum*, these texts include the Dublin Rule, *Regula reclusorum dubliniensis*, and its appendices, *Admonitiones* and *Regula reclusorum Walteri reclusi*, as well as the *Letter of a Fourteenth-century Abbot of Bury St. Edmunds*. Warren, 295-297.

Scale of Perfection, one gets the sense that Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Joel and Ezra speak to their successors in one voice and on behalf of all prophets.

It seems reasonable for Rotha Mary Clay, renowned expert on anchoriticism, to conclude that “the recluse regarded himself as the follower of Elijah and John the Baptist. It was therefore his vocation to read the signs of the times, to declare, to preach, and, it may be, to predict.”³⁹ John the Baptist’s centrality to the anchoritic tradition is hard to question and the prophetic bent in the vocation is strong.

John’s Influence on Medieval English Anchorites

It appears recluses took well to John’s example. Even a quick review of the English tradition of anchor-prophets yields signs of John’s imprint. He is disproportionately represented in cell dedications relative to other saints, and, whether implicitly or explicitly, some of the most celebrated English anchorites are associated with him.⁴⁰ Perhaps this affinity for John the Baptist stems from Bede’s story of the first known British anchorite. A cadre of British bishops and monks prepared to meet with Augustine of Canterbury. Before heading out, they met with an unnamed anchorite.

The account is as follows:

They that were to go to the aforesaid council, repaired first to a certain holy and discreet man, who was wont to lead an eremitical life among them, consulting with him, whether they ought, at the preaching of Augustine, to forsake their traditions. He answered: ‘If he is a man of God, follow him.’ ‘How shall we prove that?’ said they. He

³⁹ Clay, 146.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 24-26, 134, and 162. A number of examples are specified in this chapter.

replied, 'Our Lord saith, Take my yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart; if, therefore, this Augustine be meek and lowly of heart, it is to be believed that he has taken upon him the yoke of Christ, and offers the same to you to take upon yourselves. But, if he be stern and haughty, it is plain that he is not of God, nor are we to regard his words.' They again asked: 'And how shall we discern even this?' 'Do you contrive,' said the anchorite, 'that he may first arrive with his company at the place where the synod is to be held; and if at your approach he shall rise up to you, hear him submissively, being assured that he is the servant of Christ; but if he shall despise you, and not rise up to you, whereas you are more in number, let him also be despised by you.'⁴¹

Augustine remained seated when he met the delegation and the British bishops held fast to their word from the anchorite and rejected him. Augustine even offered to set aside the many areas where English customs were in conflict with the universal church as long as they would (1) honor Easter at the right time, (2) complete the Sacrament of Baptism, and (3) assist in preaching the gospel to the English.⁴² The anchorite, however, had already spoken, and "no voice carried more weight than did the voice crying repentance in the wilderness."⁴³ The account shows that this group of bishops and monks, presumably some of the island's holiest men, deferred to the anchorite when faced with one of their most crucial decisions. More to the point, the anchorite speaks to them with the authority of John the Baptist.

⁴¹ Clay, 146-147; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 105-106.

⁴² Bede, 106.

⁴³ Clay, 151. An exhaustive list of solitary prophets would undoubtedly include Maildubh of Malmesbury, Guthlac, Cuthbert, Neot, Wulsi, Thomas Scropes, Walter Hilton, and Richard Rolle. Simon Stock, who earned his name by living in the hollow trunk of a tree for a period would also be in this company. All of these anchorites were regularly consulted by kings and warriors as well as townspeople from all walks of life. They answered with just the right word of grace or judgment and often did so even before being asked. Clearly, the church accommodated the prophetic voice of the anchorite.

More often, the solitary took it upon himself or herself to make the connection explicit for the community. Godric of Finchale, one of England's most famed hermits, dedicated his chapel to John the Baptist and hosted guests in it.⁴⁴ As Rotha Mary Clay tells it, John was Godric's model from the outset:

Desiring to follow the example of John Baptist in the wilderness, he lived on herbs and wild honey, with acorns, nuts, and crab-apples. He slept upon the bare ground, and rising at daybreak, went forth to gather food, falling on his knees in prayer every few paces.⁴⁵

For more than sixty years Godric would follow in John's footsteps, even traveling to underground caves in Judea.⁴⁶ Like other desert saints, he was known to have special power over wild beasts. For example, by signing the cross Godric once brought a pouncing wolf to its feet and led it to depart.⁴⁷ Similar legends of his power abound (especially over serpents), stirring pilgrims in the thousands. Godric believed John the Baptist once sent him two monks to feed, and this belief suggests that Godric felt a close affinity to John.⁴⁸

Other solitaires felt the presence of John the Baptist as well. Emma of Shrewsbury became known for her vision of John the Baptist. On the Eve of St. Francis in 1296, she and her maid began the vigil along with two visiting Minorite friars. The handmaid lit candles on the altar twice, but they were mysteriously extinguished both

⁴⁴ Clay, 134.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 24-26.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Paul Burns, *Butler's Lives of the Saints: New Concise Edition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 229. These two men sent from John may work as a gloss on the two John sent to Jesus in Luke 7:18.

times. The room was brightened by streams of light from the window of the oratory of St. John the Baptist adjacent to the church. The light, said to be “surpassing the radiance of the sun,” gave “a heavenly lustre” to maidens in another part of the house.⁴⁹ The “abundance of the celestial illumination” brought these maidens to tears.⁵⁰ Shortly thereafter, the women had a vision of Mary who told the anchoress to gather the friars to witness this light that was purifying the anchorhold. One of the friars sought the source of the light and saw a burning torch in front of the image of John the Baptist, the “herald of Eternal Light.”⁵¹ There is much that one could glean from the vision, but the significance of John the Baptist bearing witness to the Holy Light is worthy of mention. Indeed, John the Baptist seems to play almost as strong a role as Christ does.⁵² Christ may be the unnamed light in the vision. John the Baptist essentially christens the anchorhold and marks it as holy space.

Emma’s vision provides one of the best illustrations of who John the Baptist is in the minds of anchorites and in the church. No one short of Christ seems to enflesh the gospel like he does. The medievals rightly sense that John carries an eschatological moment in his body.⁵³ Whether, like Robert of Basevorn, one sees him as the last of the Old Testament prophets, or, like some others, as the first of the New Testament

⁴⁹ Clay, 140.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 141.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 4.

prophets, John is emblematic of the role and aspiration of the church.⁵⁴ In truth, John's iconic power is so great that he is never reduced to a mere representational character; he is integrated into the kerygma itself and remains part of the ongoing reality of Christian proclamation.⁵⁵ John continues to light the way for the medieval church with his good example of faithful life.⁵⁶ And, importantly, the beauty of his life does not draw attention to itself but sheds light on Christ instead. John is the "unassuming, self-effacing witness."⁵⁷ Since the anchoress seeks to reveal Christ's virtue rather than her own, John the Baptist is an incomparable example for her.

Frontier Paradise

Surprisingly, John's exalted status did not make him an aloof figure. The medieval church had a sense of John's softer side. His affinity for the wilderness did not mark him as a tough guy but a devout one. This was a man for whom God was enough. The honeymoon imagery of Jeremiah 2:2 was manifested in his life, "I remember the

⁵⁴ James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 270. James Murphy sees John as the first because of the Good News inherent in, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Walter Wink suggests that with John the Baptist's appearance the Kingdom begins to arrive. Wink describes John as the last of the prophets whose proclamation paves the way for the arrival of the second epoch of salvation inaugurated by Jesus' baptism and proclaimed at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18). Wink, 35, 46. Wink says John can be figured typologically as the church because he prepares the way for Christ.

⁵⁵ On this note, Wink sees the church drawing John into the heart of its proclamation and not fossilizing him. Wink, 115.

⁵⁶ Siegfried Wenzel, trans., *Preaching in the Age of Chaucer: Selected Sermons in Translation*, Medieval Texts in Translation, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 224.

⁵⁷ Wink, 114, note 1.

devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.”⁵⁸

If John had a simple life with his Lord, it was only a testament to the power of his devotion. Even if John could be a little temperamental at times, it was because he had “fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos, a communion with the divine consciousness.”⁵⁹ He was quite simply, enamored, and since John developed this “transcendent sensibility” out in the wilderness, anchorites followed his trail.⁶⁰

There was some debate as to just how far John’s path led.⁶¹ Literalists thought only rural settings counted and that a true anchorite could only make a home in settings that were geographically remote. Progressives saw wilderness as something the anchorite enacted. For them, the anchorhold itself was secondary because the wilderness was within, found in the endless web of the recluse’s thoughts, doubts, fears and questions. Her heart would be the site of her fiercest battles, and this would be true whether the anchorhold was on an uninhabited island or in an urban center like London with 35,000 residents.⁶² Christ’s presence was thought to be equally strong either way. Ultimately, this debate about wilderness only underscores its importance and points to the legacy of John the Baptist. The wilderness debate also parallels another. Anchorites

⁵⁸ Jeremiah 2:2 NRSV.

⁵⁹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1969), 26.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Warren, 12-13.

⁶² Ibid., 38. Warren says London was by far the largest city with 35,000 residents around 1377. Norwich had less than a third of this population.

describe their anchorholds in a number of ways—as bridal chambers, prisons, wombs, tombs, and towers, but by far the most common metaphor is the desert.⁶³ Again, this pattern seems to reiterate the influence of John the Baptist.

The fact that he is in the wilderness at all is telling. Carl Kazmierski suggests that John’s contemporaries were surprised to find him in the desert.⁶⁴ He was the son of a priest and expected to become a priest as well. So anchorites were not alone in thinking, as Kazmierski argues, that “his being in the wilderness was as important as what he had to say.”⁶⁵ The life experiences of solitaires would bear this idea out. The wilderness proved to be a liminal space, a place where the anchoress progressively shed herself. Initially this might entail the loss of a name, but in time she would lose her status and many of the little cues that oriented her to social hierarchy. As the ties to kin and caste loosen, the anchoress develops a peculiar new freedom. Yet this life of withdrawal was deemed the “sanest” of lifestyles according to Ann Warren in *Anchorites and their Patrons*.⁶⁶ The strange or exotic anchorite is largely an Elizabethan construct.⁶⁷ Solitary life was an acceptable form of non-conformism, a way to move to the edge of the grid.⁶⁸

⁶³ Ibid., 8-9.

⁶⁴ Carl R. Kazmierski, *John the Baptist: Prophet and Evangelist* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 24.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Warren, 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid. She also notes that vocations of withdrawal are rarely studied and this leads to more exotic perceptions of anchorites. Ibid., 1-2.

⁶⁸ Pauline Matarasso says, “Anyone in the twelfth century who had sat on a pillar, immured him- or herself in a cell, lived as a wild man in the woods, or indeed chosen celibacy for any other reason would have been treated as a criminal or a lunatic—or possibly a heretic, which would have been worse.” John

One individual who personifies life on the edge is William of Swinderby, a solitary who lived in the region of Leicester during the late fourteenth century. Swinderby seems to have fashioned his life after John.⁶⁹ This “eccentric priest” was prone to strong emotion and inclined to resist authority.⁷⁰ His life and speech seemed to cohere much like John’s did, but in Swinderby’s case the melding made him an extremist and tended to alienate listeners.⁷¹ Apparently William walked the blurry line between hermitic and anchoritic life. He even spent some time as an ordinary lay person again before coming to Leicester abbey and dwelling in the chapel of St. John the Baptist.⁷²

Swinderby’s list of enemies increased exponentially as he preached. By 1382, the Bishop of Lincoln would not allow him to “preach in any church, chapel, or churchyard,” but this restriction only led Swinderby to preach on the highway. In fact, William continued to preach despite opposition in Lincoln, Leicester, Coventry and Hereford. Swinderby’s paper trail of indictments ends with a royal commission to find and arrest him, though at that time he was possibly hiding in Wales.⁷³ For Swinderby, anchoritic life required radical dependence on God and importantly, obedience to God

of Forde, *The Life of Wulfic of Haselbury*, intro. Pauline Matarasso (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2011), 47.

⁶⁹ Clay, 162.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid. This chapel was situated in the woods. Clay cites a 1382 bequest to “W. de S., chaplain of St. John’s chapel (Linc. Wills, 31), and notes that this chapel was situated close to a leper house, presumably, St. John’s hospital.

⁷³ Ibid., 163.

alone.⁷⁴ He saw himself as truly independent and began to function outside human power structures, whether ecclesial or secular.⁷⁵

Swinderby was among the solitaries who believed in the “frontier character of Christian proclamation” personified by John.⁷⁶ Christopher Holdsworth sums this idea up well when he explains that the anchorhold marked the frontier on multiple levels.⁷⁷ The anchoress is on the frontier personally, because she has chosen celibacy rather than marriage and child-rearing; socially, because of the location of the anchorhold on the margins; and spiritually, because she has essentially entered a commitment to secular life—a life outside the institutions of the church. Together, these work to put her on a rhetorical frontier as well. Having carved out an independent space, she is not beholden to the structures of power in the community. According to Holdsworth, the anchoress has “a permanent condition of sacred ‘outsiderhood,’” a term he draws from the Saora

⁷⁴ The anchorite’s role in the English hierarchy is worthy of exploration. Ann Warren describes anchoriticism as the highest of callings, seating the anchoress at the pinnacle of the social order, but Rotha Mary Clay suggests the pope’s role is higher. Clay, 145. In practice it seems the anchorites usually deferred to the king and to the bishop, but consider Christopher Warner in Warren’s *Anchorites and their Patrons*. Warner resists a royal summons and asserts his need to be in continuous prayer. Warren, 121. Deference to the bishop was especially expedient given the anchoress’ dependency. Anchorites could pledge obedience to the bishop in the rite of enclosure and bishops tended to approach an anchorite without resources as an ordained clerk lacking a title. Clay, 96, 103. Anchorites seemed to vary in their views on hierarchy. Robert of Knaresborough, for instance, saw himself as having only one authority: God. Clay, 153. Similarly, a number of people pursued solitary life in order to gain the sense of independence. Ecclesiastical tensions about power were also raised by instances of renegade hermits, people parading about in stolen hermitic habits, and charismatic hermits who drew people out to their chapels in neglect of church worship. Clay, 90, 165.

⁷⁵ In this regard, Pauline Matarasso says anchorites had an “Old Testament aura about them” and channeled divine power like lightning bolts. Matarasso, 43.

⁷⁶ In John the Baptist, Walter Wink sees the essence of Christian witness and the personification of the “frontier character of Christian proclamation.” Wink, 113. Günther Bornkamm agrees, arguing that John does not have a “temporal” task but is “for ever preparing the way for Christ” and standing guard at the frontier. Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 51.

⁷⁷ Christopher Holdsworth, “Christina of Markyate,” 203.

of middle India whose shamans bear a “permanent liminality.”⁷⁸ Having obtained a “statusless status, external to the secular social structure,” an anchoress also earned the right to critique the social order.⁷⁹ In this regard John seems to be a perfect exemplar.⁸⁰

Herod’s Nightmare

Perhaps the best indicator of John’s influence is the medieval *Johannesschüssel*. This medium consists of a platter fused with a sculpture of John’s head and provides the viewer with both a visual and tactile depiction of John the Baptist.⁸¹ *Johannesschüsseln* played a prominent role in medieval English spirituality and were fashioned into architecture, as moveable liturgical instruments for processions, or on amulets.⁸² They could be composed of a wide range of materials including jewels, silver or gold, wood,

⁷⁸ Christopher Holdsworth, “Hermits and the Powers of the Frontier,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 16 (1990): 68-69.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ While the focus of this chapter is on English anchorites, it may be helpful to note that in the Coptic tradition, anchoriticism is a means of resisting the powers, specifically tax collectors, and thus emulating John the Baptist tells only part of the story. William Linn Westermann explains this idea in his discussion of Coptic solitaires, saying, “The word which tax-gatherers used, in the complaint previously quoted, in telling of the desertion of the tax-subjects in their villages has an interesting history. It is *anachoresan*, literally, ‘they have gone up,’ that is, up from the river valley into the desert. It may be worth our while to note the changing meaning of this word. Always it refers to a physical withdrawal, a retreat. In the Ptolemaic period this ‘going away’ was a group action, carried out as a challenge to irritating and oppressive conditions imposed by the government. Almost always, so far as our knowledge goes, this group-protest, with threats of work cessation was successful. In the Roman period the ‘going up,’ or flight, was purely individual, an individual withdrawal from official oppression, that is, an individual’s means of escape from the lay yoke of physical and financial burdens. In the Byzantine-Coptic literature of Christianized Egypt the word ‘anchorite’ is its derivative. The ‘anchorite’ is the man who has ‘gone up,’ retreated into caves or dens of the desert’s edge. The suggestion that he was merely emulating the forty days of solitude in the desert of Jesus of Nazareth or the ascetic life of John the Baptist is not adequate. He, too, is an escapist. But he is fleeing the yoke of the world’s spiritual evils and terrors.” William Linn Westermann, “On the Background of Coptism,” in *Coptic Egypt: Papers Read at a Symposium Held Under the Joint Auspices of New York University and the Brooklyn Museum* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences and the Brooklyn Museum, 1944), 12-13; Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 138-139, note 95.

⁸¹ Barbara Baert, *Interspaces between Word, Gaze and Touch: The Bible and the Visual Medium in the Middle Ages: Collected Essays on ‘Noli me tangere,’ The Woman with the Haemorrhage, The Head of John the Baptist* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2011), 70.

⁸² Ibid, 68.

papier-mâché, or alabaster.⁸³ Whatever the material, the visual representation of John the Baptist should not be underestimated. It was both graphic and dominating.

According to Barbara Baert, “Not a single other creature besides the Baptist was allowed to compete so openly with the suffering and death of Christ.”⁸⁴

The York breviary strongly suggests that the decapitation and the Eucharist are merged.⁸⁵ On this note Baert explains, “As decapitated last prophet and proto-martyr it is positioned at the degree zero between the unbearable image of the Old Covenant and the bearable veil of the New.”⁸⁶ *Johannesschüsseln* were venerated as symbols of the Eucharist in that the removal of John’s head from unholy hands prefigured the reception of the Eucharist in the hands of the faithful.⁸⁷ Even his blood was deemed hypostatic.⁸⁸ Liturgically speaking, John is very much alive.

⁸³ Ibid, 68,

⁸⁴ Ibid, 74.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 75.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 70.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 76.



Figure 1. Anonymous, 15th century. Head of John the Baptist on a Dish. Ca. 1450-1500. Probably from Nottingham. Painted alabaster relief, 29.0 x 23.5 cm. Purchased with the Boscawen Fund, and with grants from the National Art Collections Fund, and the MLA/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchased Grant Fund (M.2.2004). Fitzwilliam Museum.

© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge/Art Resource, NY



Figure 2. Ronald Rae, *St. John the Baptist*. Courtesy of the artist, www.ronaldrae.co.uk. Rae's four-ton granite sculpture of John the Baptist suggests his immensity in the Christian tradition and also points to the ways his witness continues long after his death.

The *Johannesschüsseln* were imagined as performative media that interacted with observers so parishioners approached them with heightened expectations for miracles or paranormal activity.⁸⁹ One could argue that John continued to preach through the *Johannesschüsseln*, and situated where she was, the anchoress would have the best opportunity to learn from his model of preaching. For the anchoress who was herself something of a living metaphor, John was a kindred spirit. He was a man who

⁸⁹ Baert, 69. Baert also compares the performative power of the *Johannesschüsseln* to Medusa. Baert, 79, 85.

had lived on the limen, testifying to Christ in the womb and the tomb. The grave had only magnified his voice.

Like John the Baptist, the anchoress also spoke from the grave. The solemn rites for enclosing an anchoress give us a sense of how this was the case.⁹⁰ The rites vary considerably in content but on the whole convey the idea that becoming an anchoress meant functioning as the living dead in the community.⁹¹

The rite would begin with the recluse lying prostrate and barefoot in the part of the church where she regularly worshipped. Psalms and a litany from the Office of the Dead were read and then the recluse was censed and asperged. Once lifted, the recluse was given two tapers, to be held in each hand to symbolize the love of God and love of neighbor. After scripture readings the recluse would kneel at the altar and repeat three times, "Receive me, O Lord, according to thy Word," and listen to a meditation on the meaning of anchoritic life. There was usually a mass (celebrated by the anchorite if he was a priest). Then the assembly moved toward the anchorhold and things got considerably more dramatic.

After censing the anchorhold and sprinkling it with holy water, the bishop would say, "If he wishes to enter, let him enter" or words to this effect.⁹² Dust would then be

⁹⁰ It is important to note that some anchorites immured themselves without an ecclesial rite. This practice seems to diminish around the thirteenth century as the church tried to take on more control over the anchorites and provide financial support. For many anchorites, the bishop became a guardian and made sure they had adequate food, fuel, and wax.

⁹¹ The rites are recounted in fuller detail by Ann Warren in *Anchorites and Their Patrons* and in Rotha Mary Clay's *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*. Both comment on the variety of the rites. I am drawing on central themes.

⁹² Clay, 95-96.

scattered along with words from the commendation.⁹³ At another point the rite directs, “These things being done, let the grave be opened, entering which let the recluse himself, or another in his name, sing: ‘*This shall be my rest for ever.*’”⁹⁴ Once inside, the recluse was ceremonially immured or bricked into the anchorhold with the understanding that he or she would remain for life.⁹⁵ The door to the anchorhold was sealed by the bishop as a sign of the church’s blessing on the occupant’s vocation. In this act the bishop also conferred upon the anchoress a holy seat (Susan A. Keefe, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2011). The rite emphasized the permanence of the enclosure, marked the anchorite’s body as holy and consecrated to God, and effectively rendered the anchoress socially dead.

One critical act in the recluse’s ritual death was the inclusion of extreme unction. Since the rite usually included both extreme unction and a mass for the dead, she was marked as “an ‘animated corpse,’ a peculiar kind of body, a body much more susceptible to occupation by Christ.”⁹⁶ This focus on death was not just a projection. More often than not, the anchoress was buried in the anchorhold. Sometimes the grave was prepared before the rite of enclosure and in other instances the task was left to the anchoress. She was supposed to scoop out a little dirt from her grave each day.⁹⁷ If

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ This bricking in was ceremonial. In most cases there was a door available for servants to use.

⁹⁶ Frederick Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 78.

⁹⁷ *Ancrene Wisse*, 91-92; E.A. Jones, “Ceremonies of Enclosure: Rite, Rhetoric and Reality,” in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 44.

there were spatial limitations, the grave could even be used as a bed and the anchoress would sleep in it each night.⁹⁸

It is important to note, however, that some people chose to immure themselves without a rite. Wulfric of Haselbury, for instance, “without any appointment of the bishop, with no solemnity of benediction, but by the authority of the Holy Spirit who dwelt within . . . buried himself with Christ in a cell close to the church.”⁹⁹ The link between anchoritic enclosure and social death remains whether the church offers its seal or not. With or without a rite, the four walls of the anchorhold would pin the recluse as the four nails pinned Jesus to the cross, and she was encouraged to pray:

May my body hang with your body, nailed on the cross,
fastened, transfixed within four walls—and I will hang with
you and nevermore come from my cross until I die.¹⁰⁰

Thus, her body, culturally devalued as female and frail, becomes a sign of divine suffering and transcendence. The townspeople see her “animated corpse” and find a reminder of Jesus’ death and their own. Much like the martyr’s body, hers becomes one that it is looked “at” and “through.” So the anchoress performs transcendence for the community, and her body becomes an icon that facilitates an actual encounter with Christ. The anchoress points to Jesus, not to herself, and in this respect she follows the model of John the Baptist. John did not seek his own glory, but Christ’s.

⁹⁸ Warren, 106.

⁹⁹ Clay, 90.

¹⁰⁰ This prayer ends a meditation in *The Wooing of Our Lord*, one of the works associated with *Ancrene Wisse*. *Ancrene Wisse*, 256.

A few of the rhetorical implications are worth mentioning here. After enclosure the anchoress' body becomes an essential part of her message and speaks as loudly as John's severed head. She carries a similar porosity and becomes, in Liz Herbert McAvoy's words, a "socio-religious statement or utterance."¹⁰¹ Again, rhetoric is not limited to the verbal realm but leans heavily on semiotics. Her words, even if few in number, will be weighted with an authority gained from being the living dead. The implications of these dynamics will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3, but I raise them here in an attempt to emphasize a more fundamental point: both John the Baptist and the anchoress speak from the grave. Hence, as each recluse was enclosed, with or without a solemn rite, Herod's worst fears were manifest. John, whom he beheaded, was raised.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the prophetic character of anchoriticism. Attending to its performative dimensions, I have approached it as a form of public proclamation strongly influenced by its primary biblical antecedent, John the Baptist. I have pointed to the signs of John's influence that are documented in guides written for anchorites, and also in the ways well-known English anchorites took labors to associate themselves with him. Further, I have shown John's imprint on the two primary rhetorical spheres for the anchorite—the frontier and the grave. With the freedom of

¹⁰¹ Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Place, Space and Body in Anchoritic Rhetoric," 7-9. Rhetoric is not limited to the verbal in McAvoy's view but can operate in the realm of semiotics to persuade the audience. McAvoy goes as far as to say the anchoress is a "ventriloquist" for the word of God.

one on the frontier and the authority of one speaking from the grave, the anchoress reminded people in the community of their mortality and entreated them to lead holy lives. In these ways, the anchoress did more than carry a message; she became the message. She functioned as a living sermon or parable of sorts, and she invited the people in her midst to “be” sermons as well.

Hopefully it is clear that the anchoress occupied a compelling rhetorical space with strong prophetic resonances. Her potential as a Christian witness rivals that of a cleric in a pulpit. The fact that Julian of Norwich found this vocation appealing is arresting and demands attention to the homiletical dimensions of her work. These dimensions serve as the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Genre and Power

Forasmuch as the part is vile, that agreeth not with the whole, we do decree and ordain, that no preacher aforesaid, or any other person whatsoever, shall otherwise teach or preach . . . than what already is discussed by the holy mother church; nor shall bring any thing in doubt that is determined by the church, nor shall, to his knowledge privily or apertly pronounce blasphemous words concerning the same.

-Arundel's Constitutions

Introduction

A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and *A Revelation of Love* have historically been understood as mystical texts or more recently, thanks in large part to Denys Turner, as theological ones. I argue that they are also sermons. First I explore the fluidity of the medieval sermon landscape and describe the kinds of written work that was considered sermonic. I also suggest that publication functioned as a powerful means of proclaiming these written sermons. Then I examine the special restrictions Julian faces as a vernacular writer and the ways transgressing these prohibitions amplify her prophetic voice. I find further evidence of this prophetic intent in her strategic alignments with Saints Cecelia and Mary Magdalene, two figures who also have significant ties to John the Baptist. Finally, I turn to Julian's disavowal, a moment where Julian claims, at least on the surface, to deny any authority to teach. I explain the ways this disavowal is in fact the place where she not only defends her authority but attempts to give voice to others who are similarly situated.

Page and Pulpit

Julian's titles, *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*, strongly suggest a prophetic bent through direct reference to "vision" and "revelation." Yet one might assume Julian's works cannot be deemed sermonic because they are written. As it turns out, this requirement of orality is a more contemporary sensibility. Father L. J. Bataillon suggests that some medieval sermons had an oral form and others

did not. He goes on to note the fluid nature of the genre, and explains that some spiritual treatises were shaped as sermons as a rhetorical device without any expectation of oral performance.¹ For example, Bernard of Clairvaux's celebrated sermons on the Song of Songs were crafted for a reader even though experientially they invoke a pulpit encounter.² Functionally, a sermon might work as a substitute for a face-to-face conversation as in the case of monastic sermons that were sent in epistolary form.³

Beverly Mayne Kienzle has found the medieval European sermon genre to be quite fluid. In fact, it is broad enough to encompass not only the more traditional message preached aloud in the context of a formal worship service, but also poetry, drama, letters, treatises, commentaries, and similar writings, even if they were never brought to speech.⁴ Moreover, content may begin as a sermon and evolve into a letter, treatise, or commentary, start out as a letter and become a sermon, or defy even more boundaries by moving to and fro between these genres.⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux writes works that are essentially hybrids: commentaries written in the form of sermons with

¹ Father L.J. Bataillon, "Approaches to the Study of Medieval Sermons," *Leeds Studies in English* n.s.: 11 (1980): 21.

² Beverly Mayne Kienzle, "Typology of the Medieval Sermon and its Development in the Middle Ages: Report on a Work in Progress," in *De L'Homélie Au Sermon: Histoire De La Prédication Médiévale, Actes du Colloque International de Louvain-la-Neuve*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse and Xavier Hermand (Louvain-la-Neuve: Publications de l'Institut d'Etudes Médiévales, 1993), 86.

³ Ibid. This fluidity suggests that a preacher continually carries his or her identity as such, and the pulpit has more mobile connotations.

⁴ Ibid. Kienzle describes the medieval sermon genre as "related to the letter, the treatise and the commentary (and also to the speech, the shorter vitae and the principia of university masters) and often transformed to and from those genres."

⁵ Ibid.

actual letters embedded within them.⁶ The genre appears to have been particularly broad in medieval England. According to Kienzle, “Middle English writers show a lack of precision in the usage of the word ‘sermon,’ referring to any uplifting written discourse as either a sermon or a treatise.”⁷ This description of the genre seems to encompass Julian’s *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*, and can do so without diminishing the theological rigor of her work.⁸

Apparently the gender of the author does not preclude a document’s classification as a sermon. In his research on Margaret Ebner, a fourteenth-century German mystic, Leonard P. Hindsley finds evidence of a very active preaching ministry among cloistered women:

Preaching and radical poverty, the twin fonts of the *vita apostolica*, were the encompassing ideal of Albigensians, Béguines, the Fraticelli, and Spiritual Franciscans, as well

⁶ Ibid. Apparently Bernard is not alone in this approach. Citing *J. Leclercq’s Recherches sur d’anciens sermons monastiques*, Kienzle notes that Adam of Perseigne crafted a sermon within a letter for a group of nuns. Ibid., 91.

⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸ Denys Turner has compellingly argued for Julian’s classification with theologians rather than devotional writers. Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). It is also important to remember that English medieval religious writing is a vast terrain. Amidst this variety Julian’s work is “*sui generis*,” according to Christopher Abbott. Abbott is uncomfortable with a purely homiletical classification for Julian’s work, but he admits “it has a message and, on its own evidence, seeks an audience. Even more emphatically, it clearly has no official status as a document of the Church, but its presentation does exude a peculiar confidence, even a sense of authority, despite protestations on the part of the author.” Abbott goes on to argue that genre itself is necessarily impure or fluid. It would seem these descriptions of genre would also apply to the genre of the sermon. Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 4. At later points in his analysis, Abbott describes Julian as a laywoman freely addressing an audience with “the authority of charity” and he thinks she understands herself to be engaged in a “prophetic task.” Abbott, 76, 104. Abbott also sees Julian presenting herself as a “mediator and interpreter of divine truth” who may “speak on behalf of Christ,” and is engaged in “a prophetic vocation” that involves “loneliness and risk.” Abbott, 140. Moreover, he notices the “idiom of spiritual counsel” and the “didactic and pastoral agenda under cover of the visionary.” Abbott, 164-165. Clearly, the proclamatory nature of Julian’s work stands out for him.

as the Conventual Franciscans, Dominicans, and other mendicants of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. While the nuns of the fourteenth century did not minister publicly, they were far from isolating themselves from the world. Many of them engaged in extensive exhortation through letters and other writings. They provided counsel to ordinary lay people as well as to kings, bishops, and priests.⁹

Hindsley's work suggests Julian was not the only woman using the page as a pulpit.

Through her writings, Julian sought to create an experience that was both cognitive and affective, one that would lead to spiritual formation and ethical development.¹⁰ Julian refers to this ethical focus when she closes *A Revelation of Love* with, "This boke is begonne by Goddes gifte and his grace, but is not yet performed as to my sight."¹¹ In other words, the goals of the book are not achieved until the reader is reformed, redirected and actively responding to the love of God. Julian's goal is to share a message that will actually be enacted in the life of the reader, and her message does not take on a three-dimensional life until the reader takes faithful action in the world.¹² Julian's focus is primarily experiential. This focus makes sense because the power of gospel proclamation is not limited to specific words in a given sermon; the power is in

⁹ Leonard P. Hindsley, *Margaret Ebner: Major Works, ca. 1291-1351* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 5.

¹⁰ Robert E. Wright, "The 'Boke Performyd': Affective Technique and Reader Response in the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich," *Christianity and Literature* 36, no. 4 (1987): 13-32. Frederick Bauerschmidt finds this line obscure. Yet, he goes on to suggest that the book is "not simply a medium through which a message is delivered from a speaker to a recipient, but is rather an utterance that actually constitutes both speaker and recipient in the single act of enunciation/reception. At least one sense in which Julian's book is begun, but not yet performed, is that it remains in the uncertain moment of passage from the as-yet-unconstituted speaker to the as-yet-unconstituted recipient. The book is begun by God's grace, but it can only be finished when it is received, and it can only be received by being "performed," by serving as the *mythos* of an actual communal embodiment of the Gospel." Frederick Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 191-192.

¹¹ Watson and Jenkins, 379; Spearing, 179.

¹² Bauerschmidt, 49-50.

the change of life and the experience of growth listeners have as they accept the message and act on it. In other words, the experience of edification brings the words to their intended end.¹³

One stylistic factor in this process is “intermediality,” the interactive dynamic between word, image and performance.¹⁴ Julian’s works build on this trio. The reader’s affective experience is shaped in two ways. On one level, Julian engages the reader with vivid, photographic images. In addition, her use of rhyme, meter and alliteration give her work a strong aural quality.¹⁵ Other scholars have written extensively about her style, so a few brief examples should suffice here. Her characteristic assonance and alliteration are clear when she describes Jesus’ dying body by saying, “And in the beginning, while the flesh was fresh and bleeding, the continual sitting of the thornes made the woundes wide.”¹⁶ Alliteration emphasizes one of her most famous lines on sin: “Also God shewed that sinne shalle be no shame, but worshippe to man.”¹⁷ She regularly pairs repetition with her images as in the following womb image:

We are beclosted in the fader, and we are beclosted in the
son, and we are beclosted in the holy gost. And the fader is

¹³ Calvin points to this idea when he says, “Hence the visible Church rises conspicuous to our view. For wherever we find the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there, it is not to be doubted, is a Church of God.” Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume 2. Translated by John Allen and edited by Benjamin Warfield and Thomas C. Pears, Jr. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 281.

¹⁴ Kathryn Starkey and Horst Wenzel, *Visual Culture and the German Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 5.

¹⁵ Robert Wright, 15. Marion Glasscoe reads this orality as indicative of oral composition and suggests Julian dictated her revelations to an amanuensis. Julian of Norwich, *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe. Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), xviii.

¹⁶ Watson and Jenkins, 181; Spearing, 66.

¹⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 237; Spearing, 94.

beclosed in us, the son is beclosed in us, and the holy gost
is beclosed in us: alle mighty, alle wisdom, and alle
goodnesse; one God, one lorde.¹⁸

In each case Julian seems conscious of how her work will live aurally. The net effect is a stirring immediacy capable of drawing the reader into a visceral experience of the Passion. The experience of the Passion and the resulting longing for union with God (later called “compunction”) make her works “uplifting written discourse” and render them sermonic.¹⁹

Along this line, it is also helpful to emphasize that medieval reading was not a private, silent exercise. Reading was done aloud and usually communally even if all in the group were literate.²⁰ Reading was a social enterprise. The publication of a given work was less about issuing a commodity, and more about making it known to the public. This idea is evident at the linguistic level. “Publisshen,” the Middle English word for publish, has fundamentally oral connotations, and the meanings include ‘announce,’ ‘proclaim,’ and ‘spread abroad.’²¹ As Felicity Riddy explains, it is difficult to make fine distinctions between written and spoken discourse, especially with texts like Julian’s where the written word has such a strong oral representation, and where:

[S]ermons, dream-visions, prayers, tales, chronicles, saints’
lives, plays- even a revelation of love- arose from and

¹⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 297; Spearing, 130.

¹⁹ Kienzle, 87.

²⁰ Felicity Riddy, “‘Publication’ before Print: the Case of Julian of Norwich” in *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300-1700*, ed. Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 34. Joyce Coleman provides a thorough study of the aurality of medieval reading as well. Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²¹ Riddy, “‘Publication’ before Print,” 41. Riddy goes on to explain that ‘publisshen’ “has the senses both of speaking and being spoken about.”

responded to the endless exchange of ideas that took place in the to-and-fro of sociability. 'Publication' is short for public conversation."²²

Publication then, allows Julian to breathe so much life into the words that they are literally preached aloud again and again by different people. In this sense, publication is the best means for helping the reader own the revelation. The revelation belongs to the church and Julian's role is to share it. Furthermore, the written manuscript is not a barrier to proclamation, but an essential tool in ensuring that the word is shared by all.

Using the Vernacular

Julian's style creates a sense of immediacy that is lacking in scholastic argument. A.C. Spearing describes the freedom in Julian's style as stemming from one who writes in the vernacular (rather than Latin) and suggests she was largely inspired by vernacular poetry and narrative.²³ And here, in her use of the vernacular, some of the most daring aspects of Julian's work emerge.

²² Ibid., 42-43. Riddy goes on to account for the lack of medieval manuscripts of *A Revelation of Love* by suggesting that institutional copies were protected by clergy until the Reformation. In contrast "domestic copies, as evanescent as the talk on which they rested, were eventually discarded by uninterested heirs, or used to light the fire, or perhaps even read to bits." Riddy, 49. While she is not a homiletician, Riddy points to an important theme in contemporary homiletics when she ties publication to conversation. Similarly, Liz Herbert McAvoy discusses Julian's work under the category of the fifteenth-century "common-profit" books. These texts were designed to circulate among the laity rather than rest with a single author. Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 230-231.

²³ Spearing, xvi; A.C. Spearing cites Caroline Walker Bynum on Julian's narrative and poetic influences. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 196.

Usually when a person wrote in the vernacular in fourteenth-century England, one wrote to a small, personally known audience.²⁴ In Julian's case that audience consisted of an underground community who valued devotional writings. While her audience appears to have been disproportionately female, it consisted of both men and women and also included members of the laity and professional religious.²⁵ Among these early readers were members of the Brigittine and Carthusian monastic houses in London and the vicinity.²⁶ One central unifier in Julian's audience was a respect for ecstatic experience and a distrust of ecclesiastical constraints on sharing such experience.²⁷ These "Christ lovers," as Julian calls them, were both attuned to the homiletical flavor of her work and aware of the need for discretion in circulating them.²⁸ Vernacular theological writing was deemed especially dangerous.

Much of the caution stems from the influence of Archbishop Thomas Arundel. Arundel created an environment designed to stifle writers or speakers who challenged

²⁴ Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409" *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (1995): 837.

²⁵ Felicity Riddy, "Women Talking About the Things of God" in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 17, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 106-107.

²⁶ Vickie Jeanne Larsen, "The Pious Fringe: Julian of Norwich's Readers and Their Books, 1413-1843" (PhD. diss., University of Iowa, 2009), 30-31.

²⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 10-12.

²⁸ This discretion did not halt the dissemination of the works altogether or hinder the community from celebrating Julian apart from her written works. She was able to draw admirers like Margery Kempe. Nicholas Watson notes that Julian was conscious of the controversial climate even if she did not attest to it explicitly in her works. Watson, "Censorship," 852. In her dissertation on Julian's readers over a period of 450 years, Vickie Larsen says Julian's book was "required reading within a series of medievalist subcultures" that resisted conventional culture. Larsen, 3.

the ecclesiastical hierarchy or dared to defy the rules.²⁹ He is responsible for the Arundel Constitutions, 1409 legislation designed to strengthen ecclesiastical control over thought and expression. The Constitutions lead to one of the most extreme instances of censorship in English history, impacting not only the Lollards but radicals of every stripe and virtually anyone writing about theological issues in the vernacular.³⁰

Two articles deserve attention:

Article 4, Forasmuch as the part is vile, that agreeth not with the whole, we do decree and ordain, that no preacher aforesaid, or any other person whatsoever, shall otherwise teach or preach concerning the sacrament of the altar, matrimony, confession of sins, or any other sacrament of the church, or article of the faith, than what already is discussed by the holy mother church; nor shall bring any thing in doubt that is determined by the church, nor shall, to his knowledge privily or apertly pronounce blasphemous words concerning the same; nor shall preach, teach or observe any sect, or kind of heresy whatsoever, contrary to the wholesome doctrine of the church. He that shall wittingly and obstinately attempt the contrary after the publication of these presents shall incur the sentence of excommunication, 'ipso facto:' from which, except in point of death, he shall not be absolved until he have reformed himself by abjuration of his heresy, at the discretion of the ordinary in whose territory he so offended, and have received wholesome penitence for his offences.

Article 6, For that a new way doth more frequently lead astray, than an old way, we will and command, that no book or treatise made by John Wickliff, or others

²⁹ Lollards, initially led by John Wycliff, were part of a sectarian movement arguing for more religious freedom. They challenged the institutional church on a number of fronts, including the restrictions on lay preaching and women's preaching. In some ways the Lollards foreshadowed the Reformation.

³⁰ Watson, "Censorship," 826, 851. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton's view is more expansive than Watson's and she argues that Lollardy is neither the only nor the most feared form of radicalism during this era. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 12.

whomsoever, about that time, or since, or hereafter to be made, be from henceforth read in schools, halls, hospitals, or other places whatsoever, within our province of Canterbury aforesaid, except the same be first examined by the university of Oxford or Cambridge; or, at least, by twelve persons, whom the said universities, or one of them, shall appoint to be chosen at our discretion, or the laudable discretion of our successors; and the same being examined as aforesaid, to be expressly approved and allowed by us or our successors, and in the name and authority of the university, to be delivered unto the stationers to be copied out, and the same to be sold at a reasonable price, the original thereof always after to remain in some chest of the university. But if any man shall read any such kind of book in schools or otherwise, as aforesaid, he shall be punished as a sower of schism, and a favourer of heresy, as the quality of the fault shall require.³¹

Articles 4 and 6 are two of several that might intimidate a writer like Julian or members of the communities that read her work.

The Constitutions were clearly sweeping and effectively reversed Pecham's Syllabus, progressive legislation issued in 1281 as part of a campaign to increase the theological knowledge of the laity. Pecham's Syllabus held priests to a basic teaching standard in order to ensure parishioners learned the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed and other catechetical content. In addition to spelling out the core tenets every priest should be teaching, Pecham's Syllabus fostered support for much of the vernacular pastoralia that developed during the fourteenth century.³²

Arundel's Constitutions effectively overturned the progressive work of Pecham's

³¹ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, Volume 3 (London: Published by R.B. Seeley & W. Burnside, and sold by L. and G. Seeley, 1837-41), 244-245; Watson, "Censorship," 827-828.

³² Watson, "Censorship," 828.

Syllabus and made Pecham's stated minimum the new maximum that the laity could learn.³³

Even prior to 1409, there was a growing tendency to associate Lollardy with the use of the vernacular. The Constitutions codify this tendency by failing to distinguish works by Wycliff and his associates from vernacular theological writings composed by others. While charges were brought against relatively few authors, a climate that had long since greeted these writers with suspicion became even more austere.

Julian crosses the boundaries set by the Constitutions. Her God is scandalously merciful and in multiple instances she addresses content that is beyond the scope of Pecham's Syllabus. She narrates the church's bloody birth through Christ's side and the ways Christ "our moder" feeds the church through the sacraments.³⁴ Similarly, it is hard to imagine that the censors would not be troubled by the ways she parallels her own body with the crucified Christ. Both Julian and Christ are thirty years old, both are suffering and both are claiming divine transcendence.³⁵ The authorities could also take issue with the provocative similarity between Christ and the fiend because Julian portrays them both with tortured bodies and both in red. Christ is red with blood and

³³ Ibid. Watson goes on to note that rather than focusing on the priest's failure, the laws punish the laity for wanting to know too much.

³⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 313; Spearing, 141.

³⁵ Liz Herbert McAvoy describes Julian's move as an "overt substitution of her own suffering body for Christ's" and reads the references to their ages as effectively "overlaying Christ's body with a female-identified suffering." When the two bodies merge, "the body of Christ metamorphoses into a female-associated site of negotiation, a primary commodity of exchange and feminised route to salvation." Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 150.

the fiend is more like a glowing coal from Hades with blemishes, but the color parallels are striking.³⁶

In order to fully grasp Julian's meaning, the audience must appreciate the grotesque, a jarring, boundary-blurring aesthetic that makes space for re-imagination.³⁷ Julian's portrayal does not rely on sentimentality or "perfect abstraction," but "degrades" in order to re-crucify and re-incarnate Christ.³⁸ In short, she introduces an "anti-aesthetic" and assumes her audience can tolerate a mix of piety and blasphemy.³⁹ Julian takes considerable license in the way she moves between the sacred and secular. Even those who cling to the most orthodox interpretations of Julian's work have to concede that she has a pattern of testing theological boundaries. Some of Julian's earliest readers acknowledged this pattern when they circulated her work with Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, a book that famously led to Marguerite's execution.⁴⁰

³⁶ The fiend's blemishes have most often been read as pointing to the bubonic plague. McAvoy suggests Julian is probably alluding to leprosy and the depravity that was believed to precede it. Both Julian's fiend and the leprous display the "dusky redness of the face, scabs, nodules and boils, lumps on the face and earlobes." Ibid., 159. For McAvoy, Julian's parallels between Christ and the fiend amount to "an obscene parody of the Soul's union with God, or the Bride of God's long-awaited union with her celestial Bridegroom, or the consummation of Christ's love for Julian which has taken place in her own bedchamber." Ibid., 160.

³⁷ Susan Corey, "Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc C. Conner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 33.

³⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 19.

³⁹ Anthony Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 7, 63.

⁴⁰ Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake in Paris in 1310. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993). Kathryn Kerby-Fulton explores the significance of these texts traveling together and discusses some of the perceived similarities in the works, including "the uncompromising theology of love and the unembarrassed attitude toward sin." Kerby-Fulton, 298.

Furthermore, Julian's discussion of sin would also raise major concerns. At one point she says, "Also God shewed that sinne shalle be no shame, but wurshipe to man."⁴¹ Here, she separates sin from humiliation and explains how God uses sin as a vehicle to bring about holiness.⁴² She proceeds to detail people in heaven who were grievous sinners, including David, Mary Magdalene, Peter, Paul, Thomas, Saint John of Beverly (a preacher from Yorkshire), and an endless list of others.⁴³ This discussion of sin is a daring one. Julian elaborates with a statement that would calm the ecclesiastical hierarchy. She says sin is "the sharpest scorge that ony chosen soule may be smitten with."⁴⁴ Yet, Julian's reflections on the scourge of sin flow into multiple divisions, find their authority in church teaching and Christ himself, and culminate in a charge for the audience to turn to God. The content and structure are such that Julian's audience would have easily understood it as sermonic in the traditional sense.⁴⁵ So in effect, she qualifies her statement about sin not being a shame with a discussion about its harmfulness. In this discussion of sin's harmfulness, she transgresses by using a genre of speech that is prohibited to women. This "sin" of Julian's is "no shame" because it leads to worship.

⁴¹ Watson and Jenkins, 237; Spearing, 94.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 239.

⁴⁵ In Brad Peters' words, "Julian's medieval readers would have immediately recognized this excerpt as a sermon." Brad Peters, "A Genre Approach to Julian of Norwich's Epistemology" in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 133. Peters also suggests Julian's discourse on sin incorporates multiple genres, including sermon, apostrophe, and parable. He sees this fluidity as an indication of Julian's distrust for the ideology that accompanies genre and suggests that she has a desire to avoid classification. Peters, 150.

There is little question as to whether Julian's work would trouble the censors.⁴⁶

The guidelines in Arundel's Constitutions and the limited circulation of her work make its transgressive status clear. Yet, Arundel's Constitutions seem to have been most effective in inspiring a considerable amount of self-censorship and this dynamic is one of the more haunting aspects of Julian's work. Is it possible that despite the audacious elements in *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love* Julian was still censoring herself? How did she negotiate the tension between the message she was called to proclaim and the cultural expectations set out for her? In order to negotiate these difficulties Julian would need more than deft rhetorical skill. She would need to establish precedent for her posture by aligning herself with one of the saints.

Strategic Alignments

It would be natural to assume Julian would find a model in the Virgin Mary. The Virgin symbolized the highest possibilities of spiritual life: virtue, absolute obedience, abiding love.⁴⁷ No figure other than Christ himself was depicted more frequently or treated with more reverence in literature, music or visual art. The Virgin's pedestal ascended above all other human beings, male and female, and lifted her up as the quintessential model for all who sought union with God. For women, her role was

⁴⁶ Veronica Rolf reads Julian's work as a "woman's version of the gospel" and asserts that Julian could have been perceived as one who "dared to usurp the teaching and preaching roles of Latin-educated, ordained, and duly licensed male clergy." Veronica Mary Rolf, *Julian's Gospel: Illuminating the Life & Revelations of Julian of Norwich* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 2, 184. Rolf reads the Parable of the Lord and the Servant as "a laywoman's sermon, written on parchment, every bit as brilliant and compelling as any she might have heard preached from a pulpit." Rolf even suggests that listening to sermons provided a form of training for Julian. Rolf sees careful sermon listening as the path Julian took to learn how to exegete and organize her visions, make divisions and choose *thema* and *exempla*. Rolf, 181-182. If Rolf is correct, Julian's Bishop would have a strong basis for issuing some form of sanction.

⁴⁷ Mariology was at or near its acme at this time.

especially pronounced. So in the opening moments of *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*, as Julian points to the women who have inspired her and shaped her voice, the audience is poised to hear about the Virgin Mary. Yet surprisingly, the Virgin is not the focus here. Mary's absence is a clue to the audience that *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love* will not simply fulfill expectations. Julian has an agenda.

We get a glimpse of this agenda when Julian unveils the two women she sees as her foremothers: Saints Cecelia and Mary Magdalene.⁴⁸ These devout women were among the most well-known in medieval England. Saint Cecelia's popularity grew out of her inclusion in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* and the hagiographical account of her life in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Second Nun's Tale*. Mary Magdalene appeared in countless works of art, outshone only by the Virgin Mary. Both saints resisted domestication and had reputations for being strong-willed, self-determined and daring women. These attributes led to mass appeal. Yet, part of their popularity stemmed from their erotic bodies. This eroticism was not flatly sexual but underscored the body's central role in expressing desire for God.⁴⁹ Most importantly, both women

⁴⁸ Liz Herbert McAvoy describes Mary Magdalene as "a suitable anchor" for Julian because she helps dispel some myths about women. McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 146.

⁴⁹ Ola Sigurdson describes the Christian body as erotic. She explains, "a body that expresses in bodily actions its longing for God, for other human bodily beings and of redemption, not from the body but of the body. One could also speak of the ascetic body, not as a way of denying the body but rather as a practise of empowerment and thus as a practise that, at least potentially, could become an instrument of critique." Ola Sigurdson, "The Christian Body as a Grotesque Body" in *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture*, Vol. 71, ed. John Michael Krois, Mats Rosengren, Angela Steidele and Dirk Westerkamp (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 256-257.

were preachers. By aligning herself with them, Julian situates herself in a women's preaching tradition and forecasts the prophetic tenor of her work.



Figure 3. Saint Cecelia icon by Joseph Brown. Courtesy of josephbrownicons.com.

Julian introduces Saint Cecelia very early in the text as part of what could best be described as her introduction:

For the thirde, I harde a man telle of halye kyrke of the
storye of Sainte Cecille, in the whilke shewing I
understode that she hadde thre woundes with a swerde in
the nekke, with the whilke she pinede to the dede. By the
stirring of this, I conseyvede a mighty desire, prayande
oure lorde God that he woulde graunte me thre woundes
in my life time: that es to saye, the wounde of contrition,

the wounde of compassion, and the wounde of wilfulle langinge to God.⁵⁰

As for the third gift, I heard a man of Holy Church tell the story of Saint Cecelia; from his description I understood that she received three sword wounds in the neck from which she slowly and painfully died. Moved by this I conceived a great longing, praying our Lord God that he would grant me three wounds in my lifetime: that is to say, the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion and the wound of an earnest longing for God.⁵¹

Julian's alignment with Saint Cecelia is strategic for a number of reasons, but before noting these it will help to explore Saint Cecelia's story. Saint Cecelia was one of the most popular female figures in medieval theater. Her story was told repeatedly and some areas of emphasis vary. According to medieval legend, Cecelia was a beautiful young woman who, upon coming to know Christ, devoted herself to perpetual virginity.⁵² Her family found this news devastating—in part because they rejected Christianity as lunacy, but also because they hoped Cecelia's beauty would generate wealth. Cecelia succumbs to family pressure to marry, but negotiates a celibate marriage with her husband. Her passion for Christ leads many who know her to convert and ultimately this zeal makes her a target for the Roman government. Cecelia publicly refuses to deny Christ even in the face of death and is quickly set to be killed. After a failed attempt to smother her with steam, Cecelia is to be beheaded.⁵³ In the story's climax the executioner raises his sword above Cecelia's neck and strikes, but he only

⁵⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 65.

⁵¹ Spearing, 4.

⁵² Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, Vol. II, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 318-319. Saint Cecelia's story is also recounted in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*. Watson and Jenkins, 64.

⁵³ The first method of execution involves being boiled in hot water according to *The Golden Legend*. Voragine, 323.

manages to wound her. Bewildered, he tries again. Cecelia is now bleeding profusely, but her head and body are still connected. He tries a third time. This time the onlookers are aghast. They can see that Cecelia has still not been beheaded, but she is clearly mortally wounded. Bleeding from the three visible neck wounds, Cecelia preaches and sings hymns to a stream of onlookers. Masses of people convert to Christianity when they see the beautiful martyr and hear her preach. After three days of preaching with her open wounds, Cecelia dies.

Julian's reference to Saint Cecelia in the very first section of *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* surely would not have been discounted by her earliest readers. They could readily draw a host of mental images of this bleeding preaching martyr who had led so many to faith.

For Julian, Cecelia's inclusion works rhetorically on multiple levels. First, Cecelia provides an instance of a woman preacher facing resistance.⁵⁴ Cecelia is not silenced by the threat of torture and death. She will not allow the state to censor her proclamation of the gospel. Second, by alluding to Cecelia Julian presents an atypical martyr. Cecelia is not a virgin martyr and her history points to possibilities for the feminine within the church's own tradition.⁵⁵ Cecelia is also a woman whose message and legacy outpaces

⁵⁴ Susan K. Hagen uses the term "nay-sayers" to describe Cecelia's opposition. While the threat of these nay-sayers is surely not lost on Hagen, I might emphasize the idea that Cecelia faces people who are violent and powerful. These are people who will not only avoid punishment for killing her but might even be affirmed for it. Susan K. Hagen, "St. Cecelia and St. John of Beverly: Julian of Norwich's Early Model and Late Affirmation," in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 108.

⁵⁵ There has been considerable debate recently as to whether Julian was a nun who was subsequently enclosed or whether she was once a married mother whose spouse and children died during the plague.

and outlasts those who attempted to silence her. In this respect, she underscores the limits of institutional control whether governmental or ecclesiastical. Finally, Saint Cecelia's story provides a strategic frame for Julian's revelation because it recalls an era when the church was being constrained rather than doing the constraining. So here at the outset of her work, Julian reminds those who would muzzle her of their Roman predecessors. By including Saint Cecelia in this first portion of *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, Julian is creating a rhetorical space for her work or, better, making space for a homiletical hearing. She is drawing on a notion of the gospel that could be proclaimed by a woman (even a married one); that could inspire a person to face violent consequences; that is powerful enough to survive even if the preacher perishes; and that will not be policed.

Cecelia's preaching would be categorized as *marturein* and this classification is of paramount importance.⁵⁶ It is martyr preaching and draws on an integral connection between the preacher's testimony and the preacher's body. Like other martyrs, Cecelia was bearing witness physically to the gospel. Rhetorically, word and body function as a unit and the body is a warrant for the martyr's verbal witness. This critical duality also extends to anchoritic life. Given this parallel, Julian's attention to

Either way, by reminding her audience of Cecelia's influence in the church, Julian is recalling this broader history of female participation in the proclamation of the gospel. Benedicta Ward, "Julian the Solitary," in *Julian Reconsidered* by Kenneth Leech and Sister Benedicta Ward (Oxford: SLG Press, 1988): 11-29.

⁵⁶ *Marturia* is one of the many categories used for classifying sermons. Others include *anamnesis*, *didache*, *kerygma*, *parabole*, *paraklesis*, *propheteia*, and *sophia*. As the name "*marturia*" suggests, the term grows out of the tradition of martyr preaching. Of all the forms, this one has the closest connection between the body of the preacher and the words shared. The preacher is witnessing with her body. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds., *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 433-435.

Saint Cecelia should not be treated as an empty allusion. It is a strategic alignment with another woman who is known for her preaching.

Notably, there is some question as to whether Julian is enclosed during the composition of *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, though there is considerably more certainty about her enclosure during the composition of *A Revelation of Love*.

Regardless of whether she was actually enclosed during the composition of the first text, what is significant here is Cecelia's appeal to Julian. Cecelia grounds her authority on a marriage of verbal and embodied rhetoric and Julian uses a similar approach.

Julian mentions Saint Cecelia directly in the *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* but only alludes to her in *A Revelation of Love*.⁵⁷ This editorial change does not lessen Cecelia's importance in *A Revelation of Love*. Cecelia's story was so graphic and so familiar in medieval England that merely mentioning the wounds would have brought her story to mind. Cecelia's wounds communicate power and pathos much like Christ's wounds. Moreover, Julian can draw on Cecelia's preaching wounds in other ways. The wounds and the symbolism around them are ripe for the kind of typology medieval preachers delighted in. For instance, the neck wounds point to those of the preeminent preaching martyr, John the Baptist. Cecelia's three wounds parallel the three days she spent preaching and Christ's three days in the tomb. They also carry a convenient Trinitarian allusion. One can also see Christological resonance in the piercing of

⁵⁷ Julian's rationale for removing the direct reference is debatable. While most scholars see the removal as a sign of Julian's evolving authority, I find Kathryn Kerby-Fulton's argument about the political dynamics most compelling. Kerby-Fulton explains that Cardinal Adam Easton, who was from Norwich, was imprisoned under Pope Urban VI. Easton's title was St. Cecilia and this association weighted references to St. Cecelia after 1385. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, 314.

Cecelia's flesh and the use of the sword. So, Cecelia's wounds provide a helpful frame for the kind of embodied proclamation Julian will do. Indeed, Julian's anchoritic vocation seems to build on Cecelia's model insofar as Julian becomes a living martyr. The central difference here is that for Julian this process takes a lifetime and for Cecelia it takes three days.

On another level, Julian can proceed with only mentioning Cecelia's wounds because Cecelia is fundamentally a secondary figure for her. There is another person who will play a more central role in establishing Julian's apostolic authority: Saint Mary Magdalene.

The Magdalene

In medieval England, Saint Mary Magdalene had the aura of an anti-heroine. She was strong, defiant, and incomparably devout. She was a legend in the grandest sense of the word and universally respected because of Christ's clear affinity for her. And yet, Julian's alignment with Saint Mary Magdalene is in some ways more daring than the alignment with Saint Cecelia. In Julian's day, Mary Magdalene was known as a prostitute-turned-preacher.⁵⁸ Even as her life story heralded the transformative possibilities of the gospel, the stigma remained. Deliberate association with Mary Magdalene was a radical move and a challenge to the ecclesiastical empire. Mary

⁵⁸ Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala: Apostle and Leader* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 4-6. Thompson notes that the conflated Mary Magdalene resulted from confused references to the many women named Mary in the New Testament. Katherine Ludwig Jansen explores Mary Magdalene as both apostle and prostitute in parts I and II of *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Susan Haskins also addresses both portraits of the Magdalene in *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (London: HarperCollins, 1993).

Magdalene was an embodied preacher if ever there was one. Her very body told a story about being claimed by the gospel. For many, her body seemed to speak as powerfully as her words.

Saint Mary Magdalene was also hailed in Lollard circles for her preaching, so Julian is making a delicate move in pointing to her.⁵⁹ Some would read this move as taking on the authority of a preacher.⁶⁰ The very reference to Mary Magdalene would also carry a biblical counterargument to those who would argue against women's preaching. Thus, Julian's reference is a provocative one that would strategically carve a space for her embodied voice.

There are a number of striking parallels between Julian and Saint Mary Magdalene that are worthy of note. Both women witnessed Jesus' suffering—the Magdalene in real time and Julian through visionary experience. Both women also proclaimed messages to audiences that were at best dismissive and at worst potentially hostile. In time, their messages are respected and embraced and the women prove to be trustworthy messengers. Mary Magdalene is a messenger to the disciples and Julian is a messenger to her fellow Christians. Both are liminal figures and solitaires. Julian's identity as a solitary is obvious in her anchoritic enclosure. Mary Magdalene's grows out of her role as forerunner to the eremitical tradition and as a confessor saint.

⁵⁹ Katherine Jansen, 273. Jansen refers to the 1381 trial of Walter Brut, a Lollard, who defended women's preaching by pointing to Mary Magdalene. She concludes that Lollards, "justified women's preaching by invoking the example of Mary Magdalen's public apostolate in Marseilles."

⁶⁰ This take on Julian's attention to Saint Mary Magdalene would be amplified by the fact that Julian is the first woman to write a book in the English language. The endeavor of claiming a voice in such a permanent way was bold in itself.

Mary Magdalene has a long history as a hermit. According to medieval legend, she fled to the desert without food or clothing and spent thirty years in vigorous penitence and prayer. This legend was contributed to the Old English Martyrology and had circulated through England by the Middle of the ninth century.⁶¹ Eventually Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt form a composite figure, and at least in the English medieval church, Mary Magdalene becomes both a symbol of the female hermetic tradition and an example of a hermit-preacher.⁶² This narrative, known as the *vita eremetica*, in turn melded with another, the *vita apostolica*. According to the *vita eremetica-apostolica*, Mary Magdalene preached, converted the Gauls and others in Aix-en-Provence, and then retired to a cave to live out the rest of her days in prayer.⁶³ The link to apostolic proclamation is clear here, and if Julian's authority is to simulate Mary Magdalene's, then that authority must be apostolic in tenor.

⁶¹ Jansen, 38.

⁶² Mary of Egypt was known as one of the desert ammas or mothers. While she was not as celebrated as Antony of Egypt, she provided an early feminine model of solitary life. Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation, I (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 65-93.

⁶³ Jansen, 39.



Figure 4. *Mary Magdalene*, 1994. Kiki Smith, cast silicon bronze and forged steel. Courtesy of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.; private collection.

Julian is barely three lines into the revelation when she points to Mary

Magdalene:

For the firste, come to my minde with devotion:
methought I hadde grete felinge in the passion of Criste,
botte yitte I desired to have mare, be the grace of God.
Methought I wolde have bene that time with Mary
Maudeleyne and with othere that were Cristes loverse,
that I might have sene bodilye the passion of oure lorde
that he sufferede for me, that I might have sufferede with
him as othere did that loved him.⁶⁴

I thought of the first as I was meditating: it seemed to me
that I could feel the Passion of Christ strongly, but yet I
longed by God's grace to feel it more intensely. I thought
how I wished I had been there at the crucifixion with Mary
Magdalene and with others who were Christ's dear
friends, that I might have seen in the flesh the Passion of
our Lord which he suffered for me, so that I could have
suffered with him as others did who loved him.⁶⁵

Julian visually positions herself next to Saint Mary Magdalene to witness the crucifixion
in the flesh along with Christ's friends.⁶⁶ Upon hearing Julian's reference to the
Magdalene, many in her audience could picture the Magdalene standing below the
cross gazing upward at the Savior. By including her here and noting that she would like

⁶⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 63.

⁶⁵ Spearing, 3.

⁶⁶ Watson and Jenkins note that "Christ's lovers" or "dear friends" in Elizabeth Spearing's translation, referred not merely to those who were present at the crucifixion but to Julian's contemporaries who had an appetite for devotional materials. This was an underground community of sorts that passed sacred writings among themselves all the while mindful of the legal ramifications that would arise if the authors of these works became known. Watson and Jenkins, 10-11.

to have stood beside her, Julian is creating a rhetorical space for herself and erecting a barrier against those who would silence her.⁶⁷

There are a number of reasons why Julian would align herself with Mary Magdalene, and her popularity is certainly one of them. Mary Magdalene had masses of passionate admirers and hers was not the kind of devotion that was motivated from the top down. She was one of the most beloved patron saints, meaning that her appeal began with the lowest segments of society and then moved up. As the patron saint of sinners she was already beloved by many, but contemplatives, hermits, hairdressers, preachers, and prostitutes drew to her for reasons that will be discussed shortly.⁶⁸ Mary Magdalene had such a tremendous legacy in the medieval church that the Council of Oxford made her festival day, July 22nd, a legal holiday in 1222.⁶⁹ Together the popularity, patron sainthood, and festival day made Saint Mary Magdalene a hard woman to refute and a good pillar for Julian.

In medieval literature she is often referred to as simply, “the Magdalene.”⁷⁰ St. Odo of Cluny made much of her name and its root meaning, “tower.”⁷¹ He says the “*magdalus* or *tower* signifies the Church” and further, “Mary Magdalene herself signifies

⁶⁷ Liz Herbert McAvoy sees Mary Magdalene as a role model for Julian, saying, “the Magdalene in her role as announcer of the risen Christ, provides a suitable anchor for this daring act of female literary and mystical self-expression.” Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 146.

⁶⁸ Jansen, 45, 119, 138, 250, and 257.

⁶⁹ Helen Meredith Garth, *Saint Mary Magdalene in Medieval Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1950), 100. Garth goes on to note that over two centuries later Saint Mary Magdalene remained in such high regard that two women were beaten with a linen cord in 1451 for doing laundry on St. Mary Magdalene’s day.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

the Church.”⁷² In keeping with medieval fascination with typology, Mary Magdalene is compared to Eve, to the Virgin Mary, to Susanna, to the Gentiles, and even the wise ant in Proverbs 6.⁷³ Yet Helen Garth argues that the “most usual analogy made by mediaeval writers on this subject seems to be that of Mary Magdalene as a symbol of the Church.”⁷⁴ That symbolism had an apostolic slant.

More than an Apostle

Unlike Cecelia, Mary Magdalene influenced Christianity “not by being a martyr or a virgin, but by being a leader.”⁷⁵ By the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene was already known as an apostless, namely the “apostle to the apostles.”⁷⁶ Images of the Magdalene preaching to the apostles appeared repeatedly and contributed to her reputation as one who preached penance.

For many in the medieval church the name Mary Magdalene would have also brought to mind images of John the Baptist. The two were often portrayed together in medieval art.⁷⁷ Both were associated with the desert and seen as outsider-prophets.⁷⁸

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 80-83.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁵ Tracy Quan, “Mary Magdalene and Me,” *The Daily Beast*, November 10, 2009, accessed September 10, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/11/10/the-sexiest-saint.html>.

⁷⁶ Jansen, 18-19, 28, 62-82.

⁷⁷ Katherine Jansen cites a number of examples, including a fourteenth-century Florentine triptych featuring the Madonna. This triptych has two registers on the left. The upper register depicts John the Baptist in the desert. The lower register has an image of Mary Magdalene at prayer. Jansen also notes similar pairings of Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist in artistic pieces in Tuscany and Parma. Ibid., 134. John the Baptist’s diet and clothing are used to present his spirituality in material terms. Patricia Badir makes a similar move with Mary Magdalene, whom she describes as “a figure of wild serenity.” Badir goes on to quote Theresa Coletti, who says depictions of Mary Magdalene reveal “the inescapable corporeality of tears, hair, and touch—for which she was famous, consistently rendering her spiritual

Descriptions of John the Baptist as a prophet tend to go without question because Jesus says he is not only a prophet but “more than a prophet” and “Elijah who is to come.”⁷⁹ A comparable case is made for Mary Magdalene by a Cistercian hagiographer:

She witnessed the ascension on the mountain; just as she announced to the apostles the first event as soon as it had taken place . . . she showed she was equal to John the Baptist in being more than a prophet. . . Her deeds are equal to his, write the four evangelists.⁸⁰

This Cistercian hagiographer describes Mary Magdalene as the “prophet of Christ’s ascension,” and Peter Abelard and Humbert of Romans also find this title suitable for her.⁸¹

Artists made this argument on a visual level. In portraiture she is almost always pictured with long flowing hair which was a symbol of her sexual sin and of her penitence.⁸² Her hair grew to cover her nakedness with an edenic image of purity.⁸³ Yet Mary Magdalene’s hair also carried prophetic meaning. It functioned like a garment or mantle and clothed her like John the Baptist, a prophet who was known for being dressed in camel’s hair.⁸⁴ This association between John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene gives her a much more prophetic connotation in medieval England. Indeed,

state in precise bodily terms.” Patricia Badir, *The Maudlin Impression: English Literary Images of Mary Magdalene, 1550-1700* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), 50.

⁷⁸ Jansen, 134.

⁷⁹ Matthew 11: 9, 14 NRSV.

⁸⁰ Jansen, 134.

⁸¹ Jansen, 134-135, note 55.

⁸² Depictions of the Magdalene’s hair earned her the role of patron saint of hairdressers.

⁸³ Jansen, 132.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 134 note 54; Rabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mainz, *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of her Sister Saint Martha: A Twelfth-Century Biography*, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 108, trans. David Mycoff (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989), 84-85, 96.

after a fairly brief struggle with the notion of having a patroness in lieu of a patron, the mendicants make her the “figurehead for the preaching of penance.”⁸⁵ Some even believed St. Francis’ ideal of the naked recluse preacher was fashioned on Mary Magdalene.⁸⁶

In medieval England, the name “Mary Magdalene” did not have wholly tame connotations. Her name evoked images of a prostitute. Though this linkage is incorrect, it grew out of two assumptions. The first assumption grows out of a misreading of Luke 7:36-50 where an unnamed woman bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. The scripture passage simply states that she was a sinful woman, not that she was a prostitute. A second leap concerns the identity of the woman. The text does not name her but some have presupposed that the woman is Mary Magdalene.⁸⁷ In any case, as a result of erroneous teaching and a rather long tradition of collapsing this episode and the identity of the woman, Mary Magdalene was seen as a prostitute who came to faith and developed a special closeness with Jesus. As a result, Mary Magdalene develops a Janus-like quality in that she embodied the sinful outsider as well as the holy insider. Since Julian composed her works during an era when prostitution was at its height, these more pejorative resonances may have been especially strong. It is hard to know how much subtext is intended by Julian’s reference. It is likely that Julian, attuned by the duality inherent in her anchoritic vocation, would find irony in the

⁸⁵ Jansen, 6.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 142.

⁸⁷ This interpretation grows out of collapsing Luke 7:36-50 with John 12:1-8 and assumes that the Mary whose siblings are Martha and Lazarus is also Mary Magdalene.

idea that a former sex worker had the strongest grasp on the church's proclamation. It is clear that Julian was aware of the issue.⁸⁸

Despite its flaws, Saint Mary Magdalene's history as a prostitute contributes to another aspect of her authority. Mary Magdalene was not imagined as merely a former prostitute, but a former prostitute-turned-apostle. With epic reversals like hers, ecclesial "authority" becomes a much more fluid concept. It cannot reside solely in titles or status but has to give way to the movement of the Holy Spirit. In fact, this dimension of ecclesial authority has deep roots that reach all the way back to prophets like Elijah and John the Baptist—two outsider prophets whom anchorites considered exemplars. So Mary Magdalene's history as a prostitute also symbolized the radical nature of the Christian faith and the way it gave voice to outsiders who were led by the Spirit. In many ways, Mary Magdalene's story erases the line between insiders and outsiders and between sacred and secular. Her story counsels the church to do the same. This lesson was one that would have been particularly appealing to an anchoress like Julian.

The Disavowal

There is a major "but" in the shadows of this discussion, and it concerns Julian's earliest description of her task in *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, her first text. Here, she specifically says she is not a teacher. In this disavowal she is deliberate about adhering to her proscribed gender role:

⁸⁸ Liz Herbert McAvoy provides an interesting exploration of the ways Julian uses language associated with sexual exchange. McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 166-169.

Botte God forbede that ye shulde saye or take it so that I
am a techere. For I meene nought so, no I mente nevere
so. For I am a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle.⁸⁹

But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a
teacher, for that is not what I mean, nor did I ever mean it;
for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail.⁹⁰

Brad Peters considers this statement a “*captatio benevolentiae*,” a rhetorical move that ordinarily conveys the speaker’s humility and regard for the audience. Yet, given Julian’s gender and its placement in Chapter Six rather than in Chapter One, he believes her audience would have detected a “grammar of resistance” in it.⁹¹ Julian’s emphasis is strikingly reminiscent of Paul’s when he describes his own preaching disposition by saying, “And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”⁹² Like Paul, she also seems to be taking up the authority to preach even as she relinquishes any claim to worldly wisdom, and this assumption of authority becomes clear as Julian continues:

Botte I wate wele, this that I saye I hafe it of the shewing
of him that es soverayne techare. Botte sothelye charite
stirres me to telle yowe it. For I wolde God ware knawen
and min evencristene spede, as I wolde be myselfe, to the
mare hatinge of sinne and lovinge of God. Botte for I am a
woman shulde I therfore leve that I shulde nought telle

⁸⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 75.

⁹⁰ Spearing, 10-11.

⁹¹ Peters, 117.

⁹² 1 Corinthians 2:3-5 NRSV.

yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I sawe in that same time that it is his wille that it be knawen?⁹³

But I know well that I have received what I say from him who is the supreme teacher. But in truth, I am moved to tell you about it by love, for I wish God to be known and my fellow Christians helped, as I wish to be helped myself, so that sin shall be more hated and God more loved. Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time both his goodness and his wish that it should be known?⁹⁴

As Julian continues, she seems intent on defending herself against those who would silence her.⁹⁵ With rhetorical skill, she compactly affirms her three-part rationale: (1) the revelation came from God, (2) she is motivated by love for the Christian community, and (3) gender seems a poor reason for disobeying God's desire to make the revelation known.⁹⁶ It seems she is in fact taking on authority from the "soverayne techare," and feels justified in sharing her message because she is moved by love.⁹⁷ Moreover, she describes her task as sharing the "goodenes of God" in a way that will help her fellow Christians.⁹⁸ Here, she is in keeping with the tone of an earlier statement in the same section about her purpose:

⁹³ Watson and Jenkins, 75.

⁹⁴ Spearing, 11.

⁹⁵ On this assumption of authority, Christopher Abbott says, "Visionary authority is by definition a form of the authority of experience. . . Though uncertificated and ecclesiastically unenfranchised, Julian stands shoulder to shoulder with the accredited male *magistri*, at once a praxis-orientated theorist of the spiritual life, an acute diagnostician of psycho-spiritual ills, and something of a strategist." Abbott, 165-166.

⁹⁶ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton discusses this rhetorical pattern and the implicit responses to some common arguments Julian faced. Kerby-Fulton, 301-302.

⁹⁷ Her phrase, "charite stirres me to telle yowe it," reveals love as the primary impetus for Julian's preaching. She is convinced that God wants her to proclaim the visions because of the great love they convey. Watson and Jenkins, 75; Spearing, 11.

⁹⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 75; Spearing, 11.

And ye that heres and sees this vision and this techinge
that is of Jhesu Criste to edification of youre saule, it is
Goddess wille and my desire that ye take it with als grete
joye and likinge as Jhesu hadde shewed it yowe as he did
to me.⁹⁹

And you who hear and see this vision and this teaching,
which come from Jesus Christ to edify your souls, it is
God's will and my desire that you should receive it with joy
and pleasure as great as if Jesus had shown it to you as he
did to me.¹⁰⁰

Julian takes a very strong posture by directly emphasizing edification and urging the audience to receive her message as if it came directly from Jesus Christ. Her stance here strongly suggests that the disavowal is a trope of humility or a strategic rhetorical move designed to enable a hearing.¹⁰¹ What is clear, however, is that the disavowal is not the place where she shakes off any hint of prophetic authority but the very place where she takes it on. The Apostle Paul serves as an exemplar in this respect.¹⁰²

The fact that Julian eventually removes the disavowal from the *A Revelation of Love* is also compelling. Most scholars interpret Julian's excision as a sign of her own evolving sense of authority and spiritual development and as yet more support for the

⁹⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 73.

¹⁰⁰ A.C. Spearing, 10.

¹⁰¹ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton notes that some men used the "lewd, feeble and frail" trope given the preoccupation with humility in medieval English culture. Kerby-Fulton, 301. This short phrase of Julian's continues to spark debate among Julian scholars. Some, like Denys Turner, author of *Julian of Norwich, Theologian*, do not read this disputed phrase as a humility *topos*. For Turner this issue goes to the larger purpose of his book in establishing Julian as a theologian rather than a mystic who is the recipient of a special revelation that contests ecclesial teaching. As a theologian rather than a mystic, Julian has no contested revelations to defend, and is seeking no elevated status on the basis of her revelations. Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 72. In my view, Julian needs the humility *topos* in order to get a hearing. She needs the *topos* as a foundation for making the case that she is equal to all Christians-- neither superior nor subordinate.

¹⁰² 1 Corinthians 2:3-5 NRSV.

notion that it was a trope of humility in the first place.¹⁰³ Julian seems more relaxed about negotiating the issue of her authority in *A Revelation of Love*:

Alle that I say of me, I mene in the person of alle my
evencristen, for I am lerned in the gostely shewing of our
lord God that he meneth so. And therefore I pray you alle
for Gods sake, and counceyle you for youre awne profite,
that ye leve the beholding of a wrech that it was shewde
to, and mightely, wisely, and mekely behold God, that of
his curteyse love and endlesse goodnesse wold shew it
generally in comfort of us alle. For it is Goddes wille that
ye take it with as grete joy and liking as Jhesu had shewde
it to you.¹⁰⁴

And what I say of myself, I am saying on behalf of all my
fellow Christians, for I was taught in the spiritual showing
of our Lord God that this is his purpose; and therefore I
beg you all for God's sake and advise you for your own
advantage that you stop paying attention to the poor
being to whom this vision was shown, and eagerly,
attentively and humbly contemplate God, who in his
gracious love and eternal goodness wanted the vision to
be generally known to comfort us all; for it is God's will
that you should receive it with joy and pleasure as great as
if Jesus had shown it to you all.¹⁰⁵

Instead of defending her authority or building a case around it, Julian rests on an assumption of equality among Christians. According to Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, Julian's term "counceyle" connotes the mutual kind of advice friends or equals share with one another.¹⁰⁶ With her lighter touch, the audience is led to focus more on the content of the visions and also on God who offers it to the Christian community. Yet Julian continues to hold the vision out as authoritative and still urges her audience to

¹⁰³ Spearing, xviii.

¹⁰⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 153.

¹⁰⁵ Spearing, 53.

¹⁰⁶ Watson and Jenkins, 152.

receive it with as much joy and delight as if Jesus himself had shared it. Julian has undermined the hierarchy between clergy and laity altogether by standing with her audience as a recipient of the very revelation she has shared.¹⁰⁷ She seeks to preach the visions and maintain a position of equality with her listeners.

Conclusion

While Julian does not use the word “sermon” to describe her work, she clearly intends for her audience to receive her message with a similar amount of gravity. The issues concerning genre and authority in Julian’s works emphasize just how little rhetorical space Julian has and just how much audacity is required of her in publishing her writings. In short, Julian is a preaching pioneer. Saints Cecelia and Mary Magdalene are helpful to Julian both because they are female preachers and pioneers in their own ways. The two serve as models for Julian because they clear rhetorical spaces for themselves in a hostile climate. This task is not entirely verbal; it requires considerable attention to the body. As Julian contends with the role of the body in proclamation she will turn to yet another model—the Apostle Paul. His influence on her approach to preaching will be explored in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁷ Nicholas Watson describes this rhetorical strategy beautifully, saying “This gesture ameliorates suspicions that she is usurping a clerical role, but does so only by wholly dissolving the hierarchic distinction between cleric and noncleric on which the Oxford debate was based and substituting for it one between God and humankind in general.” He goes on to say, “Julian states that God reveals himself to all according to the depth of their love of him, privileging not even the recipient of the revelation herself . . . she situates herself with (not over against) her readers, a learner, not a teacher.” Watson, “Censorship,” 851.

Chapter Three
Preaching Like Paul

And therefore I desired a bodely sight, wherin I might have more knowinge of the bodily
paines of our saviour.

-Julian of Norwich

Introduction

Initially, one might assume Julian of Norwich has nothing in common with Mumia Abu-Jamal. He is the alleged perpetrator of the 1981 murder of Philadelphia police officer, Daniel Faulkner, and has spent thirty years on death row, largely in solitary confinement. Yet, despite this confinement, his prior history as an activist and journalist creates continual demand for his insights. Since his incarceration he has authored six books, had a regular radio broadcast with *Democracy Now*, and recorded keynote addresses for The Evergreen State College and Antioch College. While listening to him talk on justice, family, politics, loneliness and a range of other issues, listeners must simultaneously reckon with his incarcerated body. Mumia's physicality looms throughout these broadcasts, giving him a stronger somatic presence than he might have otherwise. As a result, he is best understood by those who are attuned to the way his body merges with his content. Like a modern-day version of the Apostle Paul, his words are never severed from his bound body.

And it is here where I see Julian and Mumia coming together, despite the roughly 600 years that separate them and the fact that Julian's confinement is voluntary and Mumia's is not. Like Mumia, Julian engages in a Pauline form of rhetoric that foregrounds embodiment.¹ The body shades all of what is said and will not be confined to a purely mechanical sphere. Instead, word and body function as equals in a rhetorical

¹ Michael Eric Dyson suggests a link between the Apostle Paul and a host of other incarcerated wisdom writers. Dyson includes Mumia Abu-Jamal on this list. Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2010), 133.

unit. The two are thoroughly intertwined and form the key to understanding Julian's proclamation of the gospel.

In this chapter I argue that Julian has an embodied understanding of the gospel and follows a Pauline approach. This chapter marks a shift from the previous two chapters where I examine Julian's homiletical purpose within her English medieval context. Now I will argue that Julian enacts a biblical approach to preaching modeled by the Apostle Paul. I identify parallels between Julian and Paul at the levels of text, theology and performance. First, I argue that Jesus' body is Julian's text and point to the Pauline precedent for this method. Then I turn to the theology undergirding this move, finding a respect for human weakness essential to Julian's theology as well as Paul's. I find further consistency in the rhetorical tools used to articulate weakness: both find a resource in tactility and the grotesque. Finally, I shift to the area of performance and describe the ways Julian and Paul are rendered present to their audiences while being physically confined. Ultimately I find that Julian preaches with Paul's embodied approach to proclamation.

Body as Text

The medieval theologian saw scripture as a living organism. Lines from the bible itself formed the skeletal framework while commentary and interpretations passed down through the centuries constituted the sinews and muscles. Insights from the traditions of preaching and liturgics were equally vital, and these offerings, the "glossa

ordinaria,” were printed on the same page as the words from the bible itself.²

Together, the bible and its reception history, constituted the “sacred page.”³ If we also consider the influence of vivid illustrations such as those in the Queen Mary Psalter or the Luttrell Psalter, it becomes clear that sacred texts were anything but flat. They had a dynamism that rivaled that of a live debate or performance or even a Balinese cockfight—the example Clifford Geertz uses to define a text.⁴

Geertz, an anthropologist, has a helpfully elastic understanding of text and it includes written items, oral discourse and even non-verbal events, like the cockfight. Items gain status as texts when they draw on emotion for cognitive purposes.⁵ As an anthropologist, Geertz is hesitant about commenting on the authoritative value of given texts. He sees texts as the record of central motifs and archetypes, and exegesis plays a critical role in making these motifs intelligible and edifying.⁶ I find Geertz helpful because of his broad understanding of what can count as a text, his emphasis on dynamism, and his appreciation of a text’s formative value.

For instance, the cockfight uses emotion for cognitive ends. It speaks “in sentiment” about the thrill of victory, the anguish of loss, and the excitement of competition, and is formative because individuals are shaped and communities are built

² Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 80.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 448.

⁵ Ibid., 449.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 25. Exegesis is not limited to scripture but applies it to other texts. *Freud and Philosophy* also provides the example of the *interpretatio naturae*, a medieval tradition that read nature as scripture and used the principles of biblical exegesis.

around these “emotions thus exemplified.”⁷ This “sentimental education,” draws on both individual and community beliefs and provides a sense of how they appear when synthesized and displayed publicly.⁸ Simply stated, texts form people. Whether a page from the Queen Mary Psalter or a Balinese cockfight, texts provide the structures, codes, and sentiments that shape communities and cultures.⁹ This potential is powerfully demonstrated when the text is a human body.¹⁰ In this sense the body’s particularity can function mnemonically to encode the ideology of the culture and offer it for consumption and instantiation.¹¹ Jesus’ body functions in a similar way for Julian by being the locus of pure love and mediating the content of Christian faith.¹²

“The Parchment of His Body”

One of the more complex problems arising from a homiletical reading of Julian’s life and work stems from her use of scripture. She does not exegete it even in the looser medieval sense of this term. Julian does not use scripture to prove her own knowledge or sanctity. Instead she takes a more gentle approach, favoring soft allusion to extended quotation. The censorship of vernacular translations may explain some of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. Once displayed, central themes and aesthetics play together in symbolic structures that render them more intelligible.

⁹ For Geertz, culture is an assembly of texts or a pastiche of stories community members tell themselves about themselves. Ibid., 448.

¹⁰ I am mindful of those who resist descriptions of the body as texts for fear of objectification. I agree that many of these concerns are valid even as I make an historical argument for Julian’s case.

¹¹ Leonard C. Hawes, “Becoming Other-Wise: Conversational Performance and the Politics of Experience” in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volume III. Edited by Philip Auslander (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 84. Hawes explains that “The body, as the text of signs written by experience and recorded as marks of character, is a mnemonic medium in which are inscribed the principles of the content of culture.”

¹² Frederick Bauerschmidt, “Julian of Norwich Incorporated,” *Modern Theology*, Volume 13, 1 (1997): 75-100, 86. Bauerschmidt sees Christ’s body “in all his corporeal particularity” as Julian’s text.

her restraint, but not all of it for it is clear that she has more than a passing familiarity with scripture. Exegeting scripture is simply not a central task for Julian. Exegeting Jesus' body is. She is in tune with the anonymous thirteenth-century preacher from St. Georgen who describes the image of Jesus as "a text, written by Christ for his followers on the parchment of his body."¹³ Jesus' body is Julian's text.¹⁴

Now in arguing that Julian uses Jesus' body as her central text I am not suggesting that Julian is somehow subordinating the church's teaching to her visions or creating a contest between the two. I read Julian as one who desires to see herself as

¹³ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "The 'Various Writings of Humanity': Johannes Tauler on Hildegard of Bingen's *Liber Scivias*," in *Visual Culture and the German Middle Ages*, ed. Kathryn Starkey and Horst Wenzel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 167. The sermon, "Von mænger hande schrift der mentschait," translated by Hamburger as, "Of the various writings of humanity," begins, "Dominus narrabit in scripturis populorum," Psalm 86:6, "The Lord shall tell in writing of peoples." Hamburger finds the sermon distinctive because of "the preacher's insistence on the equality of word and image as means of access to sanctity." Ibid., 165. The preacher explains, "Our Lord has also given us another scripture, that is, the scripture of the laity, for there are many people who can't read what's written in books. God has therefore given them another form of writing, from which they learn how they should strive to enter heaven. This writing consists of the paintings of the saints in the churches, how they lived, and what they did through God, and what they suffered on his account. One does that, for example, through many things. One thing is that they should learn from the lives of the saints how they ought to hope and aspire to the heavenly kingdom, just as did the saints. The second thing is that they will be strengthened in their true faith in seeing what the saints suffered for their true faith. And the third thing is that when our heart is unsteady and unfortunately seldom at rest with itself, then the person [looking at the paintings] finds his heart in the images [sin hertze denne an dem gemælde vindet] as he looks at the things that are painted before him and then afterwards considers it inwardly [or by heart, 'inwendig']." Ibid., 166. I noted that Julian was "in tune" with this medieval preacher, but there is a distinction. When he directs his audience to images of Christ's body, he is deliberate in emphasizing their representational value. The images for him are authorized portrayals of the Passion displayed in wall paintings. They are not the fruit of direct revelation as in Julian's case. The two are "in tune" in the ways they value both word and image and focus on the crucified body. Julian hones in on the open side and the pierced brow in two instances, and the anonymous preacher turns to Christ's sunken head and nudity in two examples. The body is the text for both.

¹⁴ Bauerschmidt explains that Jesus' body is a text not only for Julian but for others in the medieval English church. He explains, "Images of Christ's body as text can be found in several medieval English sources, particularly in descriptions of what was called the 'Charter of Christ,' the charter of humanity's freedom from the thralldom of Satan, written by Christ in his own flesh on the cross." Bauerschmidt, "Julian of Norwich- Incorporated," 84.

orthodox even if she is a bit provocative.¹⁵ Further, in an attempt to convey that orthodoxy, I see Julian continually subjecting herself to the rule of charity and the discernment of spirits after the model of the Apostle Paul.¹⁶ Yet Julian clearly approaches Jesus' body as an exegete would approach scripture. Oliver Davies notes the many words in Julian's work that denote interpretation, "Phrases such as 'I conceived,' 'I understode,' 'wonder,' 'marvayle,' 'thus I toke it,' 'me thought,' 'as to my understanding' sound throughout Julian's writings and express her ever present desire to understand her 'lesson of loue' aright."¹⁷ Davies sees further evidence of her exegetical intent in her repeated references to "bodily" sight and "ghostly" sight. These descriptions "parallel the two most fundamental terms of medieval scriptural exegesis, which is to say the 'literal meaning' (sometimes known as the *sensus corporalis*) and the 'figurative meaning' (often known as the *sensus spiritualis*)."¹⁸ Since these two dimensions were modeled by Saint Augustine, they became standard for medieval

¹⁵ Vincent Gillespie agrees with this characterization in "Strange Images of Death: The Passion in Later Medieval English Devotional and Mystical Writing," in *Zeit, Tod und Ewigkeit in der Renaissance Literatur*, Band 3, *Analecta Cartusiana*, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg, Austria: Institut Für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1987), 134.

¹⁶ Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 74. Turner convincingly argues that Julian is most concerned about the impact of the showings and how they stir the audience to love, and this stance is similar to Paul's as he shows the Corinthians "a more excellent way." Turner compares the authority of Julian's showings to that of the Pauline charism. He understands Julian's teachings as "teachings of an essentially prophetic, charismatic character, meant for the church" and didactic gifts from the Holy Spirit. *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁷ Oliver Davis, "Transformational Processes in the Work of Julian of Norwich and Mechthild of Magdeburg," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England V: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1992*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

exegetes. One can conclude that Julian's usage is not merely devotional but "positively exegetical."¹⁹

While Julian's motives are exegetical and not strictly devotional, it is important to note that Jesus' body was repeatedly compared to a book in the devotional tradition during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁰ This comparison grew out of the contemplative practice of *lectio domini*, which was similar to *lectio divina* but involved meditating on images rather than words.²¹ This kind of devotion had political implications because it increased the agency of the illiterate and produced people who engaged the world imagistically.²² Margery Kempe, for example, moves around the world with internal pictures of Jesus that have continuing immediacy and regularly move her not only to tears but wracking sobs.²³ After seeing the pietà she is "compelled to cry out very loudly and weep very bitterly, as though she would have died."²⁴ Seeing her so moved, a priest tries to calm her, saying, "Woman, Jesus is long since dead."²⁵ But these words provoke a frustrated response, "Sir, his death is as fresh to me as if he had died this same day, and so, I think it ought to be to you and to all Christian people.

¹⁹ Ibid., footnote 25. Davis also notes the influence of Origen, who saw scripture as a second incarnation having both a body and a spirit. Davis makes a strong argument about Julian's exegetical motives, going on to say her approach is "no adjunct to the medieval process of exegesis but is rather its essence and its goal." Davis, 45.

²⁰ Gillespie, 111.

²¹ Ibid., 112.

²² Ibid., 114. This agency could certainly make ecclesial authorities uncomfortable and some of their resistance was based on the potential for error and gross deviation from church teaching.

²³ Margery does not even need actual paintings or sculptures of Jesus; she also responds to people on the street who simply remind her of Jesus.

²⁴ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. B.A. Windeatt (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 186.

²⁵ Ibid., 187.

We ought always to remember his kindness, and always think of the doleful death that he died for us.”²⁶

Responses like Margery’s were stirred through *lectio domini*. Often, individual moments were even lifted from their sequence in the Passion and developed a life of their own. For example, in John Fewterer’s *Mirror or Glass of Christ’s Passion*, the nailing of Jesus’ left hand is extended and complicated.²⁷ Layers of meaning are found in each detail and the Passion narrative achieves a timeless quality.²⁸ Reading Christ’s body in this way requires a unique kind of literacy that is attentive and compassionate.²⁹ The reader is not simply looking at words but reading the divine personality and this experience is both affective and cognitive.³⁰ Julian must develop this literacy and her willingness is clear from the start.

The centrality of Jesus’ body is evident from the beginning. After a few essential introductory comments, Julian turns to the body. The first showing is a trickle of blood streaming from a grievous wound from the crown of thorns. She find this trickle just as the skin is torn for it runs “hote and freshly, plentuously and lively, right as it was in the

²⁶ Ibid., 187. Vincent Gillespie also cites this exchange (in Middle English). Gillespie, 114.

²⁷ Gillespie, 124-125.

²⁸ Ibid., 125.

²⁹ Ibid., 111.

³⁰ Bauerschmidt, “Julian of Norwich- Incorporated,” 84-85. Bauerschmidt also cites Richard Rolle, one of the fourteenth-century English mystics who prays for an appropriate reading disposition. Rolle says, “sweet Jesu: Your body is like a book entirely inscribed in red ink (which is) compared to your body because that is entirely inscribed with red wounds. Now, sweet Jesu, send me the grace to read this book again and again, and to understand something of the sweetness of that reading; and allow me the grace to grasp something of the matchless love of Jesus Christ, and to learn from that example to love God in return as I should do.” Rolle also sees Christ’s body as a meadow full of fragrant flowers and healing herbs for the soul. He suggests that an individual’s spiritual disposition shapes his or her experience of the aroma of Christ’s body. Richard Rolle, *Meditations on the Passion in The English Writings*, trans. Rosamund S. Allen (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 114.

time that the garland of thornes was pressed on his blessed head.”³¹ Julian goes on to exegete this “bodily” sight throughout the next few chapters.³² In the blood, she finds insights about the Holy Trinity as almighty, all wisdom and all love; about Mary as a model of reverence and devotion; and about Jesus as humble and longing for closeness with the church.³³ The initial vision of the trickle of blood even births an ancillary vision shown to help deepen her analysis. In this case, Julian is shown a hazelnut that symbolizes all that is made—the earth and all who dwell on it.³⁴ This vision of the hazelnut reciprocates Jesus’ humility and longing for closeness by illustrating the world as a small, humble thing in desperate need of divine care. All of her interpretive insights can be tied back to the trickle of blood because it is the generative focal point.

Maintaining her proximity, Julian moves to Jesus’ face. She pans slowly, almost cinematically so that we can see the hurled spit, bruises, dirt, agonized wincing and the ear covered in dry blood.³⁵ She admits that this is one of the more obscure frames, but need us to keep looking and not turn away.³⁶ Lingering, we see Jesus’ face change color and hear Julian explain that seeking and beholding God are blessed acts, and that our labored searching honors God.³⁷ Julian invites us to look through a glass darkly and see

³¹ Watson and Jenkins, 135. Julian’s Middle English prose is clear here, but Spearing provides a modern translation. Spearing translates the line as, “hot and fresh and very plentiful, as though it were the moment of his Passion when the crown of thorns was thrust on to his blessed head.” Spearing, 45. This line also appears in *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*. Watson and Jenkins, 67; Spearing, 6.

³² Watson and Jenkins, 134. The editors explain that this bodily vision “underlies” the succeeding ghostly sights in this first showing.

³³ Watson and Jenkins, 135-137, and 139-151; Spearing, 45-46, 47-53.

³⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 139; Spearing, 47.

³⁵ Liz Herbert McAvoy, *A Companion to Julian of Norwich* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer; Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 186, note 20.

³⁶ Watson and Jenkins, 159; Spearing, 55.

³⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 157-159; Spearing, 55.

that spiritual discernment is a slow and delicate thing.³⁸ As she tries to make out this obscured text, she makes it clear that whenever we discern we are trying to make out an occluded image of the divine with strained and shadowy eyes. Her humble approach underscores the limits of human knowledge.

In another instance, the fourth showing, Julian brings us to a moment when Jesus is bathed in blood. This is a graphic, three-dimensional moment taking us down or “full depe into the tender flesh.”³⁹ The actual depth of the wound is obscured by the sheer volume of liquid as the “hote blode ranne out so plentuously that ther was neither seen skinne ne wounde, but as it were all blode.”⁴⁰ The abundance here becomes a foundation for a discussion of how precious and plenteous the blood of Christ is, flowing all the way to hell to free sinners. This abundance contrasts the church’s liturgical emphasis on the scarcity of Jesus’ blood.⁴¹ Julian even explains the present-oriented tense of this vision: While Jesus is safe in heaven he continues to bleed out. Each droplet of blood is tantamount to intercession for Jesus is “preying for us to the father, and is and shal be as long as us nedeth.”⁴²

When Julian makes direct reference to scripture she typically does so to expand on her corporeal text. For example, the eighth showing portrays Jesus’ dry and bluing flesh. It becomes bluer and moves through four distinct colors as the skin dries. It is in

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSV; Watson and Jenkins, 159; Spearing, 55.

³⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 167; Spearing, 59.

⁴⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 167; Spearing, 59-60.

⁴¹ Amy Laura Hall, “A Ravishing and Restful Sight: Seeing with Julian of Norwich,” in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 157.

⁴² Watson and Jenkins, 167; Spearing, 60.

this acute dryness that Jesus' words, "I thirst," resound.⁴³ Julian explains that this is a "doubille thurste: on bodely, and another gostly."⁴⁴ Another instance occurs in *A Vision Showed to A Devout Woman*, the Short Text. Here, Julian briefly, though graphically recounts the torment of the drying body and follows by saying each listener should, "aftere the sayinge of Sainte Paule . . . 'feelee in him that in Criste Jhesu.'"⁴⁵ She alludes here to Philippians 2:5, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," a verse that begins Paul's stirring discussion of kenosis.⁴⁶ Yet, it is clear that the scriptural reference is ancillary to the vision of the body and the experience that flows out of encountering the body. Again, the body functions as her text.

This idea is especially evident in her approach to this same vision in the Long Text. This time, she starts with the same moment of the bluing, blackening flesh but extends her gaze on the drying body:

And than I saw it was for it beganne to dry and stint a parte of the weight that was round about the garland, and so it was environed all about, as it were garland upon garland. The garlonde of thornes was deyde with the blode. And that other garlond and the hede, all was one coloure, as cloterred blode when it was dried. The skinne

⁴³ John 19:28 NRSV.

⁴⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 181; Spearing, 65.

⁴⁵ Watson and Jenkins, 83; Spearing, 16. Here, Julian expects her audience to become fully absorbed in the Passion. Interestingly, Susan Eastman argues that the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 can be read as a kind of theophany with performative and mimetic dimensions. Eastman explains, "As they hear, visualize, and perhaps even sing the dramatic narrative, the Philippians are also caught up into the drama of salvation. In this way, the priority of Christ's participation in the human plight, which in turn awakens and enlivens humanity's participation in Christ, brings together the kerygmatic and ethical aspects of Philippians 2:6-11." Some listeners may even be caught up into the narrative despite themselves. Susan Eastman, "Philippians 2:6-11: Incarnation as Mimetic Participation," *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 0, no. 1 (Sample Issue) (2010): 4, 20.

⁴⁶ Philippians 2:5 NRSV. Julian also discusses kenosis elsewhere. Watson and Jenkins, 87, 191; Spearing, 18, 70.

and the fleshe that semed of the face and of the body was smalle rumpelde, with a tawny coloure, like a drye bord whan it is aged, and the face more browne than the body.

I saw four manner of drying. The furst was blodlesse. The secunde, paine folowing after. The thurde is that he was hanging uppe in the eyer, as men hang a cloth for to drye. The fourth, that the bodely kinde asked licoure, and ther was no maner of comfort ministred to him. A, hard and grevous was that paine, but moch more harder and grevous it was when the moisture failed, and all began to drye, thus clinging. These were two paines that shewde in the blissed hed: the furst wrought to the drying while it was moist; and that other, slow, with clinging and drying, with blowing of winde fro without that dried him more and pained with colde than my hart can thinke—and other paines. For which paines, I saw that alle is to litille that I can sey, for it may not be tolde.

The shewing of Cristes paines filled me fulle of paines. For I wiste welle he sufferede but onys, but as he wolde shewe it me and fille me with minde, as I had before desirede.⁴⁷

And then I saw that it was because it began to dry, and to lose some of its weight and congeal about the garland of thorns. And so it surrounded his head, like one garland upon another. The garland of thorns was dyed with the blood, and the other garland of wounds, and the head, all was one colour, like dry, clotted blood. Where the skin of the flesh of his face and body appeared, it was fine and wrinkled, with a tanned colour, like a dry board when it has been scorched; and the face darker than the body. I saw four ways in which it had been dried up: the first was loss of blood; the second was the torment which then followed; the third, being hung in the air, as a cloth is hung to dry; the fourth, that his bodily nature needed liquid, and he was given no kind of help in all his grief and pain. Ah! His pain was hard and grievous, but it was much more hard and grievous when the moisture was exhausted and everything began to dry and shrink. The pains that were revealed in the blessed head were these: the first done to the dying body while it was moist; and the second a slow

⁴⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 181-183.

pain as the body dried and shrank with the blowing of the wind from without that dried him more, and tormented him with cold as much as I could imagine, and other torments, from which I saw that everything I could say would be quite inadequate, for they were indescribable.

This showing of Christ's pain filled me with pain, though I knew well he only suffered once, yet he wanted to show it to me and fill me with awareness of it as I had wished previously.⁴⁸

In this passage Jesus' body is functioning as the investigated unit—the pericope. The extended moment with the drying body is also accompanied by a lengthier discussion of the mixture of pain and comfort that comes from witnessing Jesus' crucifixion and grasping the meaning of Jesus' continued suffering in heaven.⁴⁹ It climaxes with a bold affirmation:

I understode that we be now, in our lordes mening, in his crosse with him in our paines and in our passion, dying. And we, wilfully abiding in the same crosse, with his helpe and his grace, into the last point, sodeynly he shalle change his chere to us, and we shal be with him in heven. Betwene that one and that other shalle alle be one time, and than shall alle be brought into joy.⁵⁰

I understood that we are now, as our Lord intends it, dying with him on his cross in our pain and our passion; and if we willingly remain on the same cross with his help and his grace until the final moment, the countenance he turns on us will suddenly change, and we shall be with him in heaven. There will be no time between one moment and the next, and everything will be turned to joy.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Spearing, 66-67.

⁴⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 181-185, 187-191; Spearing, 65-67, 69-71.

⁵⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 193.

⁵¹ Spearing, 71-72.

This move to the implications for the church is a progression, a conclusion made on the basis of how the body of Jesus is interpreted. It is a homiletical move based on the bodily text. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins mention two additional issues worth noting here. First, there is an echo of 1 Corinthians 15 in Julian's words, suggesting that "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" we will be changed.⁵² Second, her theology is not superficial here. The church is not just "on" the cross with Jesus, but "in" it as her syntax suggests.⁵³ The cross is a way of life, a way shared by the church as a whole and not just the anchoress 'nailed' to the four walls of her anchorhold.⁵⁴

I would add a third insight. In this homiletical move Julian's Christology and ecclesiology come together. The church is pictured as a community of weak and scorned bodies and not as a group of power-wielders.⁵⁵ Abdul R. JanMohamed is a helpful conversation partner on this issue. Building on the work of Hortense Spillers, JanMohamed explores the voice of a person who, in Spillers' words, sits on "the frontiers of survival."⁵⁶ This frontier is marked by a mix of social and physiological weaknesses that compromise subjectivity and leave the person with a status Giorgio

⁵² 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 NRSV; Watson and Jenkins, 192.

⁵³ Watson and Jenkins, 192.

⁵⁴ This image of the anchoress as nailed to the four walls of the anchorhold is drawn from *The Wooing of Our Lord*, one of the works associated with *Ancrene Wisse*. *Ancrene Wisse*, 256.

⁵⁵ Here it is important to note that Jesus' body is not the only weak body Julian mentions. Her own weak body is the site of divine revelation, suggesting a correlation between the exegesis of Jesus' body and respect for other weak bodies. Jesus dignifies this body when he reveals himself to Julian when she is all but dead, experiencing the characteristic fixed stare, labored breathing and loss of feeling. Watson and Jenkins, 65, 131; Sparring, 5, 44. She is visibly and tangibly "lewed, febille, and freylle." Watson and Jenkins, 75.

⁵⁶ Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 10; Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection (1987): 67.

Agamben calls “bare life.”⁵⁷ This is the realm of a mixed lot of people, some vehemently maligned and others simply devalued because of their status on the bottom or their ownership of some form of vulnerability that cannot be denied or camouflaged. People with bare life are unified by the fact that they are alive and once this ceases to be, they will lose even this modicum of dignity and become “meat.”⁵⁸ By gathering the community of sufferers on the cross with Jesus, Julian is making a similar move. She is dignifying the human condition by emphasizing Jesus’ solidarity with those who have something akin to bare life. At the same time, Julian is highlighting the depth of scorn Jesus suffered.⁵⁹

As an anchoress, Julian was a respectable outsider and should not be imagined as one having bare life herself. Yet as an outsider she would have had keen insight on just how much more of an outsider Jesus was. Indeed, her attention to his body—his wounds, his porosity, and his mutilation- suggest a strong grasp of the ways Jesus was “generally dishonored.”⁶⁰ She seems to be aware of the cross as more than cruel punishment but as *cruel punishment reserved for slaves*.⁶¹ Whether one highlights

⁵⁷ JanMohamed, 8.

⁵⁸ JanMohamed, 10. I would also add that any grieving on behalf of the death of one with bare life is disenfranchised grief. In other words, the bereaved has no publicly recognized loss. Disenfranchised grief is discussed in detail in Kenneth J. Doka’s *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

⁵⁹ Despite the centuries that separate them, Julian is clearly in step with Luke Powery when he says, “Jesus died ‘gangsta-style,’ like all of the crucified peoples of the world. If the cross is our homiletical lens, then catastrophe and tragedy are at the heart of gospel preaching.” Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 42.

⁶⁰ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 13.

⁶¹ Laurence Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 133. Welborn says the cross was “almost always” reserved for slaves and members of the lower class.

Julian's declaration that those who suffer are in his cross with him, or her encouragement to "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," it is clear that Julian sees a correlation between the crucified body and the dignity in other weak bodies.⁶² This analysis grows out of seeing Jesus' body as the central text.

Julian's Pauline Approach

In one of her many Pauline references, Julian describes Jesus as "hieste and worthiest," but also "fulliest noghthede and witterliet despised," that is, "brought lowest and most truly despised."⁶³ The Pauline influence on Julian's theology is strong enough to make one wonder whether she also fashions her exegesis of Jesus' body on his example.⁶⁴ After all, Paul also interprets the body and finds in it a source of inspiration and strength. Writing in the first century, Paul does not have the resource of the canonized Gospels. He draws on the Hebrew Scriptures, his own experience, and the text of Jesus' body.⁶⁵ A litany of examples might be assembled to support this idea because Paul is, like Julian, enamored with Jesus' body. Julian's exposition on Jesus' blood is preceded (albeit less graphically) by Paul when he says, "Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from

⁶² Philippians 2:5 NRSV.

⁶³ Watson and Jenkins, 87; Spearing, 18.

⁶⁴ Denys Turner suggests that Julian's "chief scriptural source must be the Pauline letters." Turner, 220, note 2.

⁶⁵ Paul places particular significance on Christ's crucified body, as for example in Philippians 2:1-11, and Christ's embodiment in the church, as seen in Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Notably, Ernst Käsemann explains that for Paul corporeality has Eucharistic, ecclesiological, and Christological significance, and God's action in creation begins and ends in corporeality. Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 18.

the wrath of God.”⁶⁶ Jesus’ actual body and blood are interpreted here by Paul and they are the material basis for his argument. Jesus is not a compelling idea for Paul, but the one in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”⁶⁷ As Paul proclaims the supremacy of Christ, he describes him as not only the beginning, but the “firstborn from the dead,” and the one who made peace “through the blood of this cross” —incarnate characteristics.⁶⁸ That Jesus reconciled the world “in his fleshly body” is an essential core of the gospel Paul lives to preach.⁶⁹

So Julian is right in picking up the centrality of Jesus’ body in Paul’s theology. The influence of Philippians 2:5-11, concerning Christ’s move from incarnation to humiliation and then to exaltation, makes an imprint on her, and rightly so because the whole of Philippians is built around Jesus’ bodily suffering.⁷⁰ Or, simply stated, Jesus’ body is the text of Philippians.⁷¹ Paul wants to know this Jesus, “and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.”⁷² This view squares well with anchoritic theology and suggests a parallel inculcation of Paul’s

⁶⁶ Romans 5:9 NRSV. A deuterio-Pauline example can be found in Ephesians 2:13-14 NRSV, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

⁶⁷ Colossians 2:9 NRSV.

⁶⁸ Colossians 1:18-20 NRSV.

⁶⁹ Colossians 1:22-23 NRSV.

⁷⁰ In Philippians 2:5-11 NRSV, Paul says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being born in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

⁷¹ One might argue that Jesus’ body is also the central text in a number of other Pauline epistles including Romans, Corinthians, Galatians and Philemon.

⁷² Philippians 3:10-11 NRSV.

own body in proclamation.⁷³ In Paul's body Christ is glorified and the body is a crucial part of Paul's public witness.⁷⁴

Eventually the crucified body of Jesus becomes a text that Paul makes his own. In closing his letter to the Galatians, he says, "From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body."⁷⁵ He uses the word "stigmata" here and with this daring description of his scars his body becomes a sign of Christ crucified.⁷⁶ Susan Eastman notes that Paul both speaks and embodies the gospel, becoming a "theophany."⁷⁷ His body consciousness has serious implications. As Terence Fretheim explains, God is imagined as being present in the person of the preacher:

The prophet's life is thus theomorphic. By so participating in the story of God, his life is shaped in the image and likeness of God. The people thus not only hear the Word of God from the prophet, they *see* the Word enfleshed in their midst. In and through the suffering of the prophet, the people both hear and see God immersed in human experience. Through the prophet, Israel relates not only to a God who speaks, but also to a God who appears . . . Appearance makes a difference to words; seeing adds something to hearing. Further, it indicates something of the kind of word which is to be carried along by the people. They are not simply to speak that word or do it, but they are to reembody that word in the world.⁷⁸

⁷³ Susan Eastman notes that personal suffering is an integral component of Paul's preaching. Susan Eastman, *Recovering Paul's Mother Tongue: Language and Theology in Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 77.

⁷⁴ Philippians 1:20 NRSV; Eastman, "Incarnation as Mimetic Participation," 21-22.

⁷⁵ Galatians 6:17.

⁷⁶ Eastman, *Recovering Paul's Mother Tongue*, 66, 73.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁸ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 165.

Along this line it is important to note that weighting the preacher with so much authority sets the stage for troubling power dynamics and, knowingly, Terence Fretheim goes on to say the “prophet’s life as embodied Word of God is partial and broken.”⁷⁹ For Paul, embodying Christ is not solely about identifying with the divine but also identifying with humanity and humanity’s brokenness.⁸⁰ He identifies and speaks for both God and humanity and these factors militate against coercion.⁸¹ Further, Paul understands himself as a representative of Christ crucified and not Christ victorious and, in order to speak in a physical way of the crucified Christ, suffering is required.⁸² So an apostle’s authority is very different from that of a monarch for whom authority is linked with prestige, luxury and dominance; the gains of an apostle’s authority are humiliation and rejection.⁸³ Paul bears witness to a power that is not rooted in him but in the *eschaton*, and in this respect he testifies about a future hope and declares the limitation of his own power.⁸⁴

A Homiletical Precedent in Chrysostom

One might object and say Julian and the Apostle Paul are not similarly situated. He does not have access to the New Testament scriptures, except perhaps the ones he is writing, and he does not regard those letters as scripture. Julian, by contrast, does have access to the New Testament canon and if Jesus’ body is her text it is a derivative

⁷⁹ Ibid., 166.

⁸⁰ Eastman, “Recovering Paul’s Mother Tongue,” 84.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 84-85.

text. I argue that Julian's access to the canon does not diminish the centrality of Jesus' body as a text. God's action in and through Jesus Christ gives scripture its elevated status. Her visionary experience is one in which the body of Jesus is in the foreground and scripture makes the vision intelligible. The two work as a unit. Here I find a helpful example in John Chrysostom, a preacher who also has a body as a primary text and has access to the full New Testament canon.

John Chrysostom (c. 349-407) shares Julian's commitment to asceticism. He was a monk who later served as deacon and presbyter and eventually became the beloved bishop of Constantinople.⁸⁵ A good part of the church's affection for Chrysostom stems from his celebrated preaching which earned him the title, "Golden Mouth." Chrysostom is also known for his devotion to the Apostle Paul. This devotion verges on idolatry because Chrysostom's view of Paul is so high—high enough to compete with his estimation of Christ.⁸⁶ Chrysostom's biographical and exegetical works suggest that he saw the two as inseparable on some level.⁸⁷ Margaret Mitchell argues that the motive for the exegetical endeavor was the affectionate relationship between Paul and his admiring protégé.⁸⁸ Recognizing that this posture might unnerve contemporary exegetes, Mitchell explains:

Pauline interpretation as Chrysostom practices it (and no less in other contexts, including our own), is not a depersonalized, neutral endeavor in which a person (the

⁸⁵ Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, XVII.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

reader) meets an object (a written text). In awakening Paul from his grave to speak to contemporary audiences and be paraded forth as an example of piety before their eyes, the orator-exegete always has a contemporary end in view.⁸⁹

Chrysostom is consciously engaged in a “reading of resuscitation,” so that others might converse with Paul themselves.⁹⁰ While Chrysostom is distinctive in offering detailed attention to Paul’s body, his work is a product of the rhetorical world of the church in fourth-century Constantinople. In this sense, his work is both systematic and calculated.⁹¹ Chrysostom believed his audience would ‘follow Paul as he followed Christ,’ if they were given a living experience of the saint.⁹² The homily then, was an opportunity for Paul to appear to the church on earth and lead them to heaven.⁹³ Paul’s body pointed unambiguously to Christ’s body and there was no better way to make Paul present than through portraiture. Chrysostom resorts to this practice repeatedly in his homilies and he did so by bringing Paul’s body to the forefront. Paul’s members, his hands, feet, chest, etc., were texts that, once interpreted, led to both a comprehension and a practice of the Christian faith. To clarify, Chrysostom does not use portraiture to focus solely on the material Paul but as a means to developing a sense of the man as a whole.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁹¹ Ibid., 11-12.

⁹² Ibid., XXI; The scripture paraphrase refers to 1 Corinthians 11:1 NRSV.

⁹³ Mitchell, *Heavenly Trumpet*, XIX.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 99. Mitchell goes on to explain that art historians take a similar view of portraiture wherein physical characteristics are studied and interpreted as an entrée for capturing the spirit of the subject.

Since Paul's members carry so much theological meaning, it is not surprising that Chrysostom might have a lot to say about Paul's feet. Reading them, he finds evidence of one who has answered the call to missionary preaching, "What could be more beautiful than these feet, which traversed the whole earth which lies under the sun!"⁹⁵ His praise of the battered feet ends with a directive to see them as a speaking text, "have you seen how beautiful the feet are?"⁹⁶ Chrysostom makes it clear that other body parts will be exegeted as the sermon unfolds, "Do you wish to see also his beautiful belly? . . . Do you wish to see the hands he has now? Or do you wish to look upon the wickedness which they formerly had?"⁹⁷ The belly yields a lesson on asceticism and in this particular sermon the hands draw the listeners ever deeper into Paul's conversion story and their own.

Paul's hands are central figures in another sermon where Chrysostom compares Paul to a cadre of biblical patriarchs. This time the hands tell of the import of contentment and industrious labor. Drawing on Acts 20:34, "These hands served for my needs and those who were with me," Chrysostom praises Paul for prioritizing the needs of the hungry and turning away from luxury.⁹⁸ Again and again, Chrysostom turns to Paul's body and finds in it a story or a testimony about the joys and struggles of the Christian faith. The material reality of Paul's body lends credence to the gospel both he and Chrysostom proclaim so passionately. Paul's body, and by extension each Christian

⁹⁵ Ibid., 113. Mitchell is quoting Chrysostom's sermon on 1 Corinthians 13.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 114-115.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 445. Here, Mitchell is drawing from Chrysostom's Homily 1.

body, underscores the idea that the gospel is a living reality and not merely a prescribed set of assertions. The Pauline portraits function as articulations of the ends of human life and assertions of the worth of human beings.⁹⁹

Furthermore, Peter Brown suggests Chrysostom's body-loving theology was geared to revolutionize the social order. While in Antioch, Chrysostom regularly preached about the equality between citizens and *atimoi*, "civic nonpersons:"

By preaching incessantly on such themes, John wished to create in Antioch a new, more all-embracing sense of community, based on a sense of solidarity with a shared human nature. As a result, his exhortations came to place a quite unusual weight on the human body. For the body was the most vocal spokesman of all, in its manifest vulnerability, of the common descent of all human beings from Adam. John preached a brotherhood of bodies at risk. The two great themes of sexuality and poverty gravitated together, in the rhetoric of John and many other Christians. Both spoke of a universal vulnerability of the body to which all men and women were liable, independent of class and civic status.¹⁰⁰

For John, the faith was demonstrated best when Christians saw "the faceless poor as sharing bodies like their own—bodies at risk, bodies gnawed by the bite of famine, disease, and destitution, and subtly ravaged by the common catastrophe of lust."¹⁰¹

With such a strong commitment to reforming the Christian community, it should come as no surprise that Chrysostom also practiced extreme asceticism. As a young monk he did not initially join an assembled order for three years, living during this

⁹⁹ Ibid., 404.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 316-317.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 317.

interim period as a “son of the covenant,” meaning he took vows of celibacy, abstained from meat and wine, commit to wearing a habit, and devoted himself to prayer.¹⁰²

While he was not a professed hermit, he seemed to enjoy some of the independence common in solitary life. His extreme asceticism “horrified” some because in time it grew to include fasting, sleep deprivation, memorization of the Old and New Testaments and an overall abstention that exceeded mere simplicity.¹⁰³ For both Chrysostom and Julian, seeing bodies as texts correlated with a recognition of their own textual potential.¹⁰⁴

I initially introduced Chrysostom as a homiletical precedent for Julian. He had access to a comparable biblical canon and still found a central preaching text in Paul’s body. Yet I hope his example also assures those who are concerned about opening the floodgate to anything a contemporary preacher might call a “text.” I agree that there is a veritable ocean of texts, but some lay more claim on Christian life, tradition, and ethics than others. Hopefully it is clear that Paul’s body was a legitimate text for Chrysostom since it facilitated the formation of the church as a worshipping community of compassionate bodies at risk. Even those who object to Chrysostom’s ascetical practices should be able to see the merits of using Paul’s body as a text.

¹⁰² O.C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 73-74.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

¹⁰⁴ I realize that many may object to Chrysostom’s ascetical practices and perhaps Julian’s as well. They may seem especially extreme by twenty-first-century Western standards. Caroline Walker Bynum provides thoughtful discussions of this dynamic in a number of her works, including *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity: 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) and *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988).

Julian has a similar motive. She gathers the church around the body of Christ to remind us of the Passion and deepen our Christian identity. In this sense her mode of proclamation is rather Eucharistic and could be best described as preaching as *anamnesis*. By drawing us to the Passion with such immediacy she recasts time and space and narrates God's presence and action in our midst. Each foray to the body in all of its weakness is a journey to a threshold. The trickle of blood streaming from Jesus' brow, the bluing flesh, the sheets of streaming blood, and the wound in Jesus' side—each of these takes us from a moment of anguish to a greater awareness of God's loving presence, from the knowledge of ourselves as fragile and finite to the understanding of ourselves as safe and loved by God.

Essential Weakness

It seems that one of the implications of seeing Jesus' body as a central text is a foregrounding of human weakness. Notice in Julian's visions that there is no radical transformation of weakness. Julian does not run from weakness, camouflage it, or deploy a triumphalist program to master it. Instead she recognizes its centrality. In this respect, additional Pauline dimensions of Julian's work become clear. She, like Paul, sees human weakness as an essential point of emphasis and the two use similar strategies to highlight this conviction.

Notably, both Paul and Julian find it useful to draw on maternal imagery in their discussions of weakness. Labor, nursing, and care of the people of God drive the Pauline model of apostleship. Paul describes himself as a mother "again in the pain of childbirth

until Christ is formed” in the church at Galatia.¹⁰⁵ Complexities abound in this little phrase, as Paul has apparently been in labor before and his pangs surround the formation of Christ in the Galatians and not simply the birth of the Galatians.¹⁰⁶ What is clear, however, is Paul’s emphasis on his own weakness in his efforts to lead the flock.

This emphasis on weakness carries over for Julian with a different twist. In Julian’s highly celebrated maternal imagery, Christ is the mother figure experiencing labor and delivery.¹⁰⁷ The picture of Jesus as a nursing mother who has birthed the church through his side is memorably provocative and theologically rich. And yet it carries an equally engaging argument about Christian identity. Again and again, Julian uses this metaphor to assert that Christians are the children of God. In one of many such instances she says, “oure savioure is oure very moder, in whome we be endlessly borne and never shall come out of him.”¹⁰⁸ The body of Christ is imagined as very fragile and in desperate need of nurture and care. Further, this fragile status is not one that Christians outgrow. In fact, it is an honored state. Julian says as much when she explains that there is “none higher stature in this life than childehode.”¹⁰⁹ She further suggests that Christians ought to run from all that is evil and like a child lean “into oure

¹⁰⁵ Galatians 4:19 NRSV.

¹⁰⁶ A more thorough examination of Paul’s use of maternal imagery in Galatians 4:19 can be found in Beverly Roberts Gaventa’s *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 8. Paul’s use of maternal imagery varies considerably and sometimes emphasizes the weakness of the new Christians in his care as well as his own weakness. Gaventa provides a nuanced reflection on these variations.

¹⁰⁷ Kevin J. Magill, “The Body as Meditative Locus in the Revelations of Julian of Norwich,” in *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium*, ed. Ursula King with Tina Beattie (Brighton; Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 51-62; Brant Pelphrey, *Christ Our Mother* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1989).

¹⁰⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 305; Spearing, 136.

¹⁰⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 321; Spearing, 147.

lordes brest, as the childe into the moders barme.”¹¹⁰ So this emphasis on divine motherhood also affirms human finitude and exposes the idol of human strength.¹¹¹

When Julian reflects on the wound in Jesus’ side, a wound large enough for all humankind, she is making a statement about the enormity of his grace and the absurdity of human strength.¹¹² The great culmination of Julian’s argument is found in the Parable of the Lord and the Servant. The parable is a fairly opaque story of a servant whose zeal for pleasing God leads to a painful fall in a ditch and an experience of utter helplessness.¹¹³ As Julian recounts the lessons she has gleaned from the parable, it becomes clear that God does not blame the servant or abandon him in his weakness. God simply wants the servant to recognize his finitude. The parable interrogates the myth of human strength and underscores the idea that absolute power belongs only to God. Thus, the Parable of the Lord and the Servant has a deconstructive focus that reveals idolatry as a fundamental obstacle to spiritual health.

Paul is also eager to dismantle the idol of human strength and he makes this motive clear to the Corinthians:

¹¹⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 357; Spearing, 163. “Barme” is best translated as “bosom” by Watson and Jenkins. Watson and Jenkins, 356.

¹¹¹ For a thorough discussion of human finitude in contemporary contexts, see Susan J. Dunlap, *Caring Cultures: How Congregations Respond to the Sick* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 189-190. Here Dunlap states: “Finitude refers not only to bodily mortality and fragility but also to limited emotional capacity, limited abilities to understand and predict, limited powers to cure, limited control over what is most precious, limited capacity to adjust to new circumstances, limited power to protect the beloved. When healthy, these ever-present limits often recede in the jumble of areas where there is some degree of control. But when illness descends, these limits are thrown into relief. Illness strips any illusion of unlimited human power to control or predict the future.”

¹¹² Watson and Jenkins, 201; Spearing, 76.

¹¹³ Watson and Jenkins, 273; Spearing, 115.

When I came to you brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of god to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.¹¹⁴

Paul's weakness here is more than a performance of humility.¹¹⁵ Laurence Welborn explains that orators like Dio Chrysostom feigned inexperience to woo audiences, but Paul is engaging in a self-parody in order to challenge the nobility of rhetorical strength and redeem that which is considered weak and vulgar.¹¹⁶ He uses the role of the fool to critique Greco-Roman culture "from the perspective of the poor and weak, the deformed and grotesque."¹¹⁷ His suffering on account of the gospel deepens his solidarity with the weak as demonstrated in exclamations like, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."¹¹⁸

So Paul does not deny his weakness but instead uses it to reveal the power of the gospel and to expose the idol of human strength, whether physical, intellectual, or otherwise.¹¹⁹ And here is yet another area where Paul and Julian are on common ground. They both seek to shatter the idol of human strength and they use two critical strategies to do so: tactility and the grotesque.

¹¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:1-3 NRSV.

¹¹⁵ Welborn, 91.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 91, 99.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 11:29-30 NRSV.

¹¹⁹ Marva Dawn, *Power, Weakness and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 47. Dawn comments on the tendency for human powers to "overstep their bounds and become gods, so our power becomes a rival to God."

A Tactile Word

Julian experienced visions that were characterized by great immediacy and tangibility.¹²⁰ For Julian, Jesus speaks through this “tactility” more than any other means. The gravity of his suffering is conveyed by the depth of the wounds from the lash and the hot blood speaks to both the life within him and the extremity of his condition.¹²¹ Jesus speaks very few lines in Julian’s works and these words are generally conveyed through ghostly sight, i.e., less directly than Julian’s bodily sights. Jesus speaks with most immediacy through tactility, through the tenderness of his skin and through the soft tissue exposed when that skin is cut by the lash.¹²² He speaks through “pelottes” of blood, a Middle English word used to describe rain drops as well as denser matter like chunks of meat or stones.¹²³ Repeatedly, Jesus’ hot blood testifies to the life within him and the extremity of his condition.¹²⁴ His dry skin, blown blue and leathery by a cold wind indicts both the human and supernatural forces of evil in the world.¹²⁵ Julian’s epistemic framework prioritizes intimacy and proximity over distant mastery and for good reason. The medieval English world is one where touch, smell and taste connote greater immediacy than sight and hearing because the latter two are thinned by their mediation through space.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Gillespie, 133.

¹²¹ Watson and Jenkins, 167; Spearing, 59-60.

¹²² Watson and Jenkins, 167; Spearing, 59.

¹²³ Watson and Jenkins, 146.

¹²⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 135, 167; Spearing, 45, 59-60.

¹²⁵ Watson and Jenkins, 179; Spearing, 64-65.

¹²⁶ Turner, 80, note 37.

So tactility and immediacy work together. Julian uses both to communicate Jesus' subjectivity. Even in his anguish he is a full subject, unique, inviolable, and responsive to pain.¹²⁷ His pain matters. It is a pain Julian feels and shares with us only with the tacit assumption that we will also feel this pain. We are being drawn into an experience of the Passion that claims not only our eyes and ears, but our bodies as a whole. Edith Wyschogrod's explanation of St. Catherine's vision is helpful here:

When the entire body is implicated in saintly experience, the body as a whole functions as a sensorium. It does not help to say Saint Catherine saw the passion, although visions of the passion are common. Instead, truer to her account, she entered into the passion, felt it with her whole being. Nothing intervened between herself and it. The lack of distance that informs her encounter is experienced as pain. If sense is to be made of Saint Catherine's perceptual acts, her brand of seeing must be redescribed as the body's seeing.¹²⁸

Julian is not content to "see" the Passion this way on her own. She wants the whole church to have a multi-sensory experience of the Passion and a living encounter with Jesus' weak body.

Paul also finds tactility a helpful tool in articulating a theology of weakness.¹²⁹

We get this indication in Galatians when he says, "It was before your eyes that Jesus

¹²⁷ He also responds to Julian. Even as she sees him, he sees her. Further, he has agency, and says if necessary he would choose to suffer more. Watson and Jenkins, 193-195; Spearing, 72.

¹²⁸ Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18.

¹²⁹ Even though there is some disagreement about the impetus, most Pauline scholars agree that weakness and suffering play a central role in his theology. Jerry Sumney, "Paul's 'Weakness': An Integral Part of his Conception of Apostleship," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 16, no. 52 (1993): 71-91. Sumney argues that weakness is central from the start and builds his case by considering the views of David A. Black, Ralph Martin and Wayne Meeks.

Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!”¹³⁰ Exegetes believe Jesus was “exhibited as crucified” through Paul’s scars and that he showed these scars to the Galatians while he preached.¹³¹ Orators would sometimes reveal scourged skin for dramatic effect, but Paul is not doing so for shock value.¹³² He presented his scars as tangible signs of the gospel, and lest there be any doubt, he calls them “stigmata.”¹³³ Seeing this message inscribed on his body, the Galatians received him “as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.”¹³⁴ The scars, then, carried an immediate sign of human fragility and an irrefutable challenge to notions of invincibility.

Tactility enabled both Paul and Julian to emphasize the immediacy of the gospel. While they were both certainly aware of the ways tactility can be corrupted, they chose to draw on its humanizing potential. Both of them use it to demonstrate the power of God in the face of human vulnerability. Paul articulates this concept when he describes his “thorn of the flesh” and the lesson that came with it from Jesus, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Galatians 3:1 NRSV.

¹³¹ Susan Eastman, *Recovering Paul’s Mother Tongue*, 66-67. Basil S. Davis, “The Meaning of ΠΡΟΕΓΡΑΦΗ in the Context of Galatians 3.1,” *New Testament Studies* 45, no. 2 (1999): 194-212, 209. Basil Davis also considers alternative interpretations about Galatians 3:1, including the possibility that Paul’s rhetoric amounted to a portrait. Ultimately he concludes that Paul’s scars would have supplemented any verbal message he shared. Davis also affirms Richard N. Longenecker’s interpretation. Longenecker says, “that these were physical scars and disfigurements is made clear by the phrase, ‘ἐν τῷ σώματί μου’ (‘on my body’). And that Paul took them to be identifying marks of his Christian apostleship is suggested by the possessive genitive τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (‘of Jesus’).” Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, vol. 41, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Nelson/Word Publishing Group, 1990), 300.

¹³² Davis, 209.

¹³³ Susan Eastman, *Recovering Paul’s Mother Tongue*, 105.

¹³⁴ Davis, 209; Galatians 4:14 NRSV.

¹³⁵ 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 NRSV.

Julian and the Grotesque

Luce Irigaray spoke of the preacher's consummate struggle when she said, "We have to discover a language which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal."¹³⁶ Julian achieves this end through the use of the grotesque. On some level this should not come as a complete surprise given her attention to human weakness and her era. Anthony Di Renzo says, "no other period in Western history was more obsessed with God, and no other period in Western history was more obsessed with the human body and its function."¹³⁷

The grotesque is typically explained with reference to two poles. The first, from Mikhail Bakhtin, emphasizes its comic characteristics and explores its role as a regenerative change agent in the medieval social order.¹³⁸ The second perspective, from Wolfgang Kayser, hones in on the more tragic dimensions. Estrangement and terror are the prominent features of Kayser's grotesque and these are portals to a mysterious liberty in the world beyond the present one.¹³⁹ The oppositional characterization of Bakhtin and Kayser is somewhat misleading because both see the

¹³⁶ Luce Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 43.

¹³⁷ Anthony Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 62.

¹³⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 48, 51-52.

¹³⁹ To be clear, the world beyond the present one can be understood to refer to another hidden reality within the present one and also to a different world that interrupts or invades the present one. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1963), 184, 187-188; Fiona C. Black, *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies and the Song of Songs* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 104.

grotesque destabilizing forms in order to make space for re-imagination and transformation.¹⁴⁰

The grotesque can function on multiple levels. Kayser sees potential for it during the creative process and in the work itself but the strongest thrust comes at the moment of reception.¹⁴¹ At that moment our world “ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world.”¹⁴² The grotesque is arresting but strikes “fear of life rather than fear of death” and an overwhelming absurdity ensues making orientation impossible.¹⁴³

In the medieval tradition a few key characteristics of the grotesque emerge. First, the grotesque body maintains its materiality but also manages to exceed limitations, resulting in a bizarre twoness.¹⁴⁴ Opposites are melded together in such a way that the body is never singular but always plural.¹⁴⁵ The body is in flux and constantly evolving, yet the move from two bodies never quite coheres into the formation of one.¹⁴⁶ As Bakhtin explains, the body “is dying and yet unfinished; the body stands on the threshold of the grave and the crib.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ Susan Corey, “Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” in *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc C. Conner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 33.

¹⁴¹ Kayser, 180-181.

¹⁴² Ibid., 185.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Di Renzo, 67.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 68. Fiona Black makes a similar argument about hybridity. Black, 96.

¹⁴⁷ Bakhtin, 26.

Julian sees Jesus on this threshold. A prime example is found in Julian's vision of the drying body. The body blues, blackens, and shifts through four distinct colors under her prolonged gaze and Jesus' death unfolds ever so slowly.¹⁴⁸ This intermediate state is also evident in another instance when Jesus bleeds so profusely that the blood obscures the underlying wound.¹⁴⁹ The heavy bleeding and cloaked orifice has been read by at least one scholar as an allusion to menstruation, suggesting that Jesus' gender is destabilized on the cross.¹⁵⁰ As in the previous case, the moment of death is delayed.

In a third instance, Jesus shows Julian his wounded side. It is a gaping wound, "large inow for alle mankinde" and the cut is so deep that his heart is "cloven on two."¹⁵¹ Jesus is still very much alive in this vision. With his eyes he guides Julian, directing her gaze so she can see the "fair, delectable place" in his side.¹⁵² And here is where the jolt comes and the experience turns. This massive wound stemming from a spear is also a place of delight for it is the birth canal for the church.¹⁵³ It ought to be a horror but instead it is a blissful sight, a grotesque melding of the forms of death and birth. In this moment when the audience is aghast, Julian does the one thing she should

¹⁴⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 179; Spearing, 64-65.

¹⁴⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 167; Spearing, 59-60.

¹⁵⁰ Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 80-82. McAvoy also bases her argument on the Aristotelian notion of female bodies being unsealed and typified by bleeding, weeping, and lactation.

¹⁵¹ Watson and Jenkins, 201; Spearing, 76.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Magill, "The Body as Meditative Locus," 57.

not do: She offers an explanation. According to Kayser, an explanation waters down the effect of the grotesque and eases the audience's tension.¹⁵⁴

Yet, there is nothing unduly tame about the way Julian uses the grotesque, especially in the way she uses it to disrupt images of everyday life. For example, in the midst of a graphic description of Jesus' drying body, Julian compares Jesus' hanging on the cross to hanging a cloth out to dry.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, she describes thick drops of blood to the scales of a herring, a food people ate regularly at the time. In both cases she is intruding on everyday images and loading them with additional meaning. In doing so, she floods the audience's mind and memory with the Passion.¹⁵⁶ Vincent Gillespie calls images like these "kinetic" and he sees a disruption of the meaning-making process.¹⁵⁷ Images, signifiers and meaning are all off balance and only make sense when one grasps "the audacity of the strategy."¹⁵⁸ By disrupting the process of meaning-making, Julian is altering the way the audience understands the world.¹⁵⁹ As a rhetorical strategy, the grotesque takes human suffering seriously and does not attempt to erase the tragic consequences of evil. This approach may have been especially effective for the many members of her audience who were still struggling with the effects of war, banditry, famine and the plague.

¹⁵⁴ Kayser, 186. In Julian's defense, her goal is edification rather than artistic expression, and at least she holds her full explanation until the end. By "full explanation," I am referring to the final chapter where she asserts that love was God's primary intention for the visions. It is worth noting that this statement of hers is somewhat opaque.

¹⁵⁵ Watson and Jenkins, 183; Spearing, 66.

¹⁵⁶ Gillespie, 134-135.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

Paul's Grotesque

The grotesque appeals to Julian because it helpfully weaves her aesthetic and theological commitments with a respect for the weak body. Paul demonstrates a similar approach. In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul is deliberately drawing on an intellectual tradition that critiques Greco-Roman norms of foolishness and wisdom through the “grotesque perspective.”¹⁶⁰ In this tradition the “wise fool” is a hero-outsider who is uniquely positioned to judge the social order.¹⁶¹ The fool is a premiere symbol of physical and intellectual weakness in Greco-Roman theater.¹⁶² Paul exploits this symbolism by describing apostleship as a kind of foolishness and linking himself with prostitutes, actors, gladiators and others whose bodies have become violable due to their association with entertainment and spectacle.¹⁶³ These people are weak both in actuality and in public perception.¹⁶⁴ Thus for Paul, the grotesque tradition is used for perspectival purposes to critique the values of the empire and bolster his proclamation of Christ crucified.¹⁶⁵

The Bakhtinian emphasis on instability and flux is prominent for Paul as well.

Sometimes Paul will clearly announce a shift as he does when he declares, “I have been

¹⁶⁰ Welborn, 121.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. Welborn also argues that readers mistakenly remove Paul from this intellectual tradition when they spiritualize his discussion of folly or suggest that he is drunk with the spirit. Ibid., 122.

¹⁶² Ibid., 36.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 56.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 57-58.

¹⁶⁵ Richard Wright makes a similar move in his poem, “Between the World and Me.” He takes the perspective of a lynching victim to interrogate the world. Richard Wright, “Between the World and Me,” in *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, ed. Anne P. Rice (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 305-306. Abdul R. JanMohamed discusses the dynamics of this perspective in *The Death-Bound-Subject*. JanMohamed, 24.

crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”¹⁶⁶ On other occasions, this emphasis is mediated by reference to physicality, as seen in Paul’s use of the fool archetype. Fools were regularly represented as physically atypical. Welborn explains, “The actors who played the part of the fool in farce and mime were often persons with abnormally ugly bodies, chosen, evidently, on account of their weaknesses and defects.”¹⁶⁷ Often the fool’s physical weakness is attributable to the repeated violence he suffered.¹⁶⁸ On this note Welborn says, “Descriptions of the fool being beaten or slapped, and references to such scenes in literature, are so numerous, as almost to defy citation.”¹⁶⁹ Violence and scorn directed toward the fool was not only frequent but designed to be humorous. Even his clothing reflected his reviled status: the fool was often shoddily dressed in short garments to compromise his dignity and facilitate vulgar humor.¹⁷⁰ Thus the perspective of the fool gave Paul a strategic tool. As the subject of continual parody, the fool appeared innocuous but carried a threatening critique of the social order. Paul could ‘play the fool’ and expose the idols of mastery and control in Greco-Roman culture, and he could simultaneously emphasize Jesus’ solidarity with the weak.

Performing Weakness

So far I have argued that Julian and Paul see Jesus’ body as their primary text and that one of the implications is an emphasis on human weakness. Both Julian and Paul

¹⁶⁶ Galatians 2:19 NRSV.

¹⁶⁷ Welborn, 60.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 69. Welborn cites *The Brothers*, in which the fool’s head shows evidence of repeated blows.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 70.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 66.

make flat declarations about the centrality of weakness to the gospel, and they amplify these statements by using tactility and the grotesque as rhetorical strategies. Together, these two steps flesh out what it means to proclaim Christ crucified. I now turn to the issue of performance because here again there are strong parallels.

I began this chapter with a reference to Mumia Abu-Jamal, author, activist and inmate at Pennsylvania's State Correctional Institution-- Mahanoy. I commented on the ways hearing his words required the audience to reckon with his absence, or more pointedly, his incarcerated body. Human speech requires a body and the absence of that body creates a disturbing, even grotesque divide. The absented body has a phantasmal effect, distracting the listener with a haunting question, 'Where is the body?'

When *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love* were performed, Julian's audiences were met with that same question even though both works state her enclosure as an anchoress at the outset. Her enclosure as an anchoress intensifies the issue of her embodiment. Hers is a confined body, a secluded body, a weak body.¹⁷¹ In keeping with the plurality of the grotesque body, Julian has three bodies: her literal body, the anchorhold, and the immaterial body that appears when her work is read. There are points in her work when these bodies seem to wave for attention. For example, when Julian recounts her deathbed experience she carefully sets

¹⁷¹ We might also add that Julian has a dependent body because, as Ann Warren explains in *Anchorites and their Patrons*, anchorites generally relied on contributions from community members unless their cells were fully endowed. Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 42.

the scene, leaving listeners with an image of a sick body propped up in bed within a dark chamber. Both the sick body and the figural body of the anchorhold are brought to mind.

Sometimes Julian's references are more subtle. In one of these more indirect references Julian affirms our unity with the Trinity:

And the hye goodnesse of the trinite is our lord, and in him we are beclosed and he in us. We are beclosed in the fader, and we are beclosed in the son, and we are beclosed in the holy gost. And the fader is beclosed in us, the son is beclosed in us, and the holy gost is beclosed in us: all mighty, alle wisdom, and alle goodnesse; one God, one lorde.¹⁷²

And the great goodness of the Trinity is our lord and in him we are enclosed and he in us. We are enclosed in the Father, and we are enclosed in the Son, and we are enclosed in the Holy Ghost; and the Father is enclosed in us, and the Son is enclosed in us, and the Holy Ghost is enclosed in us; almighty, all wisdom, all goodness, one God, one Lord.¹⁷³

The sevenfold beclosings could certainly remind the audience of Julian's enclosure in the anchorhold.¹⁷⁴

The absent body may have also increased Julian's authority and reminded listeners of another woman who was both charismatic and enclosed: Sibyl. The Sibylline prophecy may have influenced medieval anchoriticism as indicated in a late

¹⁷² Watson and Jenkins, 297.

¹⁷³ Spearing, 130.

¹⁷⁴ One could also say that she is hyper tactile because the cold stone walls of her body are fully accessible to all.

medieval depiction of the Almathaeen Sibyl.¹⁷⁵ Shown reading alone in a dark room and wearing a wimple and veil, this image could easily bring the medieval anchoress to mind.¹⁷⁶ The more well-known story of Sibyl, that is included in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and distributed more frequently, concerns a woman known for her wisdom and her aging body.¹⁷⁷ According to the legend, Phoebus Apollo offers Sibyl eternal life in exchange for sexual union and she responds with a demand for a year of life for each grain of sand under her feet. This request is granted but, shockingly, Sibyl is given life but not given eternal youth. Over several hundred years Sibyl continues to wrinkle and shrink, but her wisdom continues to grow:

The Sibyl's once youthful and seductive body will gradually occupy a diminishing space, crumbling into insignificance to become, finally, nothing. What *will* remain, however, is her authoritative and disembodied prophetic voice, a permanent testimony to her life and destined to reverberate through time: 'voce tamen noscar' (by my voice shall I be known).¹⁷⁸

Liz Herbert McAvoy sees this phenomenon in *Ancrene Wisse* and explores the rhetorical potential of the anchoress' cave:

By colluding in the construction of its own absence therefore, the anchoress's body is in a position to exploit that absence and the resultant influx of spiritual wisdom—a wisdom which can then be articulated by the female voice without the usual impediments. In effect, voice is

¹⁷⁵ McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 207.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. The following account of the narrative is drawn from McAvoy's discussion of the Cumean Sibyl in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 208.

able to subsume problematic body and refocus attention on orality rather than corporeality.¹⁷⁹

I find McAvoy's reading of *Ancrene Wisse* compelling here, but in Julian's case a different dynamic seems to be at work. Julian does not want orality to triumph over corporeality. Instead, she seeks to emphasize the parity between the two. Her Pauline theology will not allow the body to play a subordinate role. Indeed, her weak body is continually present and absent and functions as the key to interpreting Julian's prophetic voice.¹⁸⁰

Paul manages to put his absent body to work as well. His absent body testifies to apostolic suffering so, at least in Philippians, it is helpful for him to tell his listeners that he is in jail.¹⁸¹ As in Julian's case, Paul's body is confined (and not of his own choosing). When his letters were read aloud, the churches had a compelling image of his weakness. For them, the engagement with Paul's body through the letters was quite conscious. According to Greco-Roman epistolary theory, letters carried portraits of the author's soul.¹⁸² They were intended to make the author present and to simulate face-to-face interaction.¹⁸³ One could say that Paul's letters perform him. Because of this power, John Chrysostom delighted in Paul's letters and described them as relics.¹⁸⁴ Through relics the body occupies a liminal space. The body is not fully present, since only a part

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 210.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 212. The body continually dances between presence and absence. Even when Julian is sick and fully embodied she lacks feeling.

¹⁸¹ Philippians 1:13NRSV. However, Paul can make his weakness known by other means as well. In 2 Corinthians 1:6, he openly declares that he is being afflicted.

¹⁸² Mitchell, 47-49.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 48.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 43.

signifying the whole is actually visible. Similarly, by virtue of that small part, the body is not entirely absent.¹⁸⁵ Relics, then, magnify the significance of the body through its simultaneous presence and absence.

The neither-nor dynamic of the absent body also has an edge. Judith Butler touches on the transgressive potential when she discusses what she calls the “excess” of speech.¹⁸⁶ Speech is first and foremost bodily and no speech act can fully contain the body.¹⁸⁷ The body always says more than the words, speaking in excess of them.¹⁸⁸ The fact that there is extra meaning, or rather, meaning that exceeds the intent of the speaker, shows that the speaker’s intent is not absolute. No speech act “can fully control or determine the rhetorical effects of the body which speaks,” and any speech act carries a scandalous unpredictability.¹⁸⁹ Butler elaborates:

That the speech act is a bodily act does not mean that the body is fully present in its speech. The relationship between speech and the body is that of a chiasmus. Speech is bodily, but the body exceeds the speech it occasions, and speech remains irreducible to the bodily means of its enunciation.¹⁹⁰

This excess creates the potential for transgressing cultural taboos, and most often triggers censorship. Further, in order to be effective, this censorship has had to be prophylactic. In other words, it has achieved its ends “*in unspoken ways*” because

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 46, footnote 57.

¹⁸⁶ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 155.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 155. Luke Powery may be pointing to this phenomenon when he talks about the resistance of American slave preachers. They were gagged in an attempt to silence their calls for freedom, but “gags could not prevent the body from talking, rhythmically resisting oppression.” Luke Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 37.

¹⁸⁸ Butler, 155.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 155-156.

explicit censorship must declare what cannot be spoken and in doing so exposes its own limitation.¹⁹¹ In contrast, implicit censorship works productively by forming or producing particular kinds of people who adhere to set norms.¹⁹²

Butler's analysis reveals the daring potential in the performance of Julian's work. Julian plays with the bodily excess of speech. She makes her confined body present to her audience and, whether intentionally or not, reveals a body that will not be censored in the act of gospel proclamation. In this sense, she presses at the very boundaries of bodily proclamation. Flexing the body's freedom in this way is both shrewd and audacious.

Conclusion

Luce Irigaray calls for language that does not replace the bodily encounter, but stands alongside it; for language that does not usurp the corporeal, but speaks corporeal.¹⁹³ Julian finds this language and her proclamation shows it at the levels of text, theology and performance. Rather than turning solely to scripture, Julian finds a central text in Jesus' body. Jesus' crucified body carries over into her theology, coloring it with a profound respect for human weakness. She uses tactility and the grotesque as rhetorical tools to explicate this weakness and expose the idol of human strength. This focus flows over into performance where she plays with the outer limits of bodily

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 130. This implicit censorship is more powerful than the explicit alternative because the latter must actually articulate what cannot be spoken, thus disclosing its own limited power. Ibid., 128-130.

¹⁹² Ibid., 131, 159. Geertz also alludes to this idea when he says, "Quartets, still lifes, and cockfights, are not merely reflections of pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility." Geertz, 451.

¹⁹³ Irigaray, 43.

proclamation. In each of these steps, Julian has a mentor in the Apostle Paul who uses these techniques to varying degrees as he preaches Christ crucified.

The heavy emphasis on weakness might lead one to assume crucifixion is all that matters to Julian. Yet, love and delight also shape her proclamation in significant ways. These influences will serve as the focus for the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Preacher as Lover

I will become a messenger to bring you to his bed, to the one who has made you and
bought you, Christ, the king, son of heaven.

-Richard Rolle, *Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat*

Introduction

When it comes to preaching about love, few people know more than Bill Talen, also known as “Reverend Billy.” Reverend Billy is a New York City-based performance activist who travels the United States with a message of love for some of the world’s most desperate captives: American consumers. He appears in shopping malls and multinational retail establishments and holds carnivalesque “services” to evangelize the nation. Sometimes he sings along with a gospel choir. Sometimes he “exorcises” cash registers. Sometimes he approaches consumers to educate them on the labor past of a given product, other times he hugs shoppers and assures them that they are loved. One thing Reverend Billy does almost invariably is preach, and his sermons include two inflammatory words that magically summon mall security, “Stop shopping.” In many ways the message really begins upon Reverend Billy’s arrest. It is then that consumers hear him belt out his message of love over the clink of handcuffs or over the muffled sound of his body being forcefully ushered out of a department store. It quickly becomes clear that Reverend Billy is speaking of a love that challenges earthly authority.¹

¹ According to Walter Brueggemann, Reverend Billy has the key characteristics of a prophet. Brueggemann draws on four characteristics of a prophet from Sibley Towner: a dramatic style that shades what is said, the use of daring rhetoric that challenges the dominant ideology, a ministry that is located institutionally in his many supporters, and a message of divine judgment and divine hope. Walter Brueggemann, “What Would Jesus Buy?” *Sojourners: Faith in Action for Social Justice* 36, no. 10 (2007): 13-15. Further, Reverend Billy’s message has had an impact. In addition to eliciting more than fifty arrests, he has earned a personal ban from entering any Starbucks store at home or abroad. Carmen L. McClish, “Activism Based in Embarrassment: The Anti-Consumption Spirituality of the Reverend Billy.” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): 5.

Notably, Rev. Billy's authority to preach does not come from any formalized religious body. Neither his antics nor his radical vision will lend itself to the more traditional bases of authority. Instead, he roots his authority in an outlandish form of neighbor love. This consciousness of the intertwining coils of love and power is a characteristic Reverend Billy shares with Julian of Norwich. Both preachers understand that any sermon about love also carries a message about power. Both preachers know that a revolutionary message of love demands an equally revolutionary approach to authority. And both manipulate archetypes to display that authority.

Julian's approach to authority is ground-breaking. On the one hand, her use of authority reveals her theological acumen, complexity and independent voice. It is the place where the intellectual power of her proclamation emerges. At the same time, Julian's approach links her to a fringe tradition of preaching and connects her to a group of screaming, laughing, misfit women whose manner of proclamation has yet to register as bona fide in histories of preaching. The complexity stems from the nature of Julian's goal. She preaches in an effort to stir desire for God, a task with both affective and cognitive dimensions, and she also hopes to draw listeners into the extremity of the gospel. In order to meet these objectives, I see her relying on erotic authority and this approach is at once daring and fitting for one sharing a "Revelation of Love."

In this chapter I delve into Julian's use of authority and raise some of the implications for homiletics. This chapter is divided into three parts. In Part One, I define erotic authority by drawing on the work of the late Audre Lorde, a secular theorist who

first uses the term. Then, I reflect on erotic authority's relevance to Christian preaching. In Part Two, I examine Julian's reliance on erotic authority. First, I argue that she presents an archetype of the preacher as lover who stirs desire for God. I note the ways desire and authority are woven together for her through this archetype, and I highlight four windows into her authority: adoring attention, restlessness, risk, and captivated reason. Then, I turn to the ways erotic authority facilitates her emphasis on the extremity of God's love and the extravagance of the gospel. There is biblical precedent for Julian's emphasis on the extravagance of the gospel in the proclamation of the Virgin Mary. In Part Three, I explore the Virgin's influence on medieval preaching and argue that Julian's authority as a preacher reflects a Marian approach. I explain the ways both Julian and the Virgin seek a form of authority that embraces extremity, resists censorship, and is founded on union with God.

Part I. Erotic Authority

Few, if any, theorists have mined the power of the erotic more deftly than Audre Lorde.² Lorde was a twentieth century American visionary. While not a theologian, her poetry, prose, and activism lit the path to the sacred within the human soul.³ She was an instrumental voice in human rights, particularly liberation movements for women,

² Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 53-59. Audre Lorde, *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, edited by Rudolph P. Byrd, Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18. In the introduction to *I Am Your Sister*, Byrd provides helpful context for "Uses of the Erotic," listing the political and literary backdrop for Lorde's argument.

³ Any number of Audre Lorde's works might be cited to support this claim, but in addition to *Sister Outsider*, the list should certainly include *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988); *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1997); *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance, Poems 1987-1992* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); and *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York, Norton, 1978).

African Americans and lesbian and gay liberation, and a tour-de-force as a cultural critic.⁴

On August 25, 1978, Lorde delivered a paper at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Mount Holyoke College entitled, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."⁵ In this paper she argues that the erotic is an essential source of power and information rather than a danger that must be suppressed.⁶ Reclaiming the erotic heightens one's perception and expands the capacity to experience joy in all of life.⁷ The erotic has an energizing and emboldening quality that is critical for anyone who speaks as a visionary, whether sacred or secular.⁸

Because the erotic has been maligned for so long, Lorde's first step is to distinguish it from the pornographic, its opposite.⁹ The pornographic abuses feeling and denies the power of the erotic through distance, alienation, and distortion.¹⁰ Mutuality and deep sharing are corrupted by the pornographic and consequently joy and beauty are snuffed out. While the erotic and the pornographic are "two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual," the reach of the erotic extends far outside the bedroom and colors

⁴ Sheila Hassell Hughes provides a compelling discussion of Lorde's prophetic voice and role as a visionary in "'Eye to Eye': Using Women's Literature as Lenses for Feminist Theology," *Literature & Theology* 16, no. 1 (2002): 1-26. Hughes describes Lorde as a "seer." Ibid., 14.

⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁸ In her view the erotic is something of an inner fountain that "offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough." Ibid., 54.

⁹ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁰ Ibid., 54, 59.

all of life.¹¹ In fact, attempting to limit the erotic to one realm of life is a clear sign of misunderstanding and devaluing it. Erotic power can flow in the task of painting a fence or writing a poem or any other endeavor because, as I understand Lorde, the erotic is not chiefly about sex; it is about the capacity to feel deeply and to be informed by that feeling rather than numb to its insights.¹² The erotic, then, is concerned with both increasing one's capacity to feel and connect with others and increasing one's willingness to interrogate structures, patterns, and institutions that operate on numbness and disaffection.¹³ Erotic authority directly challenges the powers of alienation and numbness.¹⁴

Of course, in a context where distance and alienation are demanded, the one who insists on feeling acutely and openly is a threat to the order. She will be encouraged to deaden her affect and silence all that is welling up within, whether that which bubbles up is anger or sorrow or bliss. If given full voice, these feelings have a liberating power that stirs restlessness with that which is "merely safe" and demands

¹¹ Ibid., 54. Here, Lorde seems to describe a delight that flows into all of life, shading perception. Later she offers an analogy, "During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it. I find the erotic is such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience." Ibid., 57.

¹² Ibid., 58.

¹³ Ibid., 55. Ultimately, the erotic concerns our actions as well as our presence of mind and heart while engaging in our actions. Ibid., 54.

¹⁴ The importance of prophetic ministry that energizes and unifies the faith community in the face of the powers is discussed in Charles L. Campbell's *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) and Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

satisfaction in more and more areas of life.¹⁵ The great gift and threat of the erotic is in this “underlining” of one’s capacity for joy and energizing one’s pursuit of it.¹⁶ Joy so nursed becomes a fountain of knowledge and power or, rather, a distinct epistemology and the basis for authority. In this sense, “the erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge,” and provides the “power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person.”¹⁷ The fact that the erotic has been the focus of contempt, censorship and parody only underscores its potential. Lorde links this resistance to the notion that erotic power exists within all of us “in a deeply female and spiritual plane,” and sees its suppression as an indication of a threat to patriarchy.¹⁸

Lorde is convinced that no form of political power can be life-affirming so long as it suppresses the erotic. She suggests the same is true for spiritual power; it devolves into an annihilating form of tyranny when the erotic is siphoned off.¹⁹ Consequently, Lorde is very suspicious of the “ascetic who aspires to feel nothing” and sees extreme asceticism as a form of “self-abnegation” that is unquestionably disempowered.²⁰ It is unfortunate that Lorde does not explore asceticism more broadly because Christian spirituality has an empowering history with eroticism that reaches back to the penning

¹⁵ Lorde, 57. Lorde goes on to say, “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.” Ibid., 58.

¹⁶ Ibid., 56. Lorde explains, “Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.” Ibid., 56-57.

¹⁷ Ibid., 56.

¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹ Ibid., 56.

²⁰ Ibid.

of the Song of Songs. But even without taking this last step, Lorde has theorized a form of authority that is nonhierarchical, generative, and able to subvert the powers of alienation and numbness. As a result, this form of authority is especially suited for those who seek to share a message of love. Christian preachers can be included in this group.

When Lorde talks about a power that underlines the human capacity for joy or stirs connection, she touches on themes that resonate for Christian preachers because the love of Christ has this energizing and unifying effect. Erotic authority is in keeping with what Letty M. Russell describes more palatably for ecclesial circles as “authority of purpose.”²¹ Russell, a feminist theologian influenced by Audre Lorde, sees authority of purpose at work in more egalitarian faith communities that understand “the source of power in their life is the love of Christ which inspires and directs them.”²² Love, then, defines the power relationships in a given community and supersedes the power that may traditionally be attributed on the basis of office. Authority of purpose resists the “flavor of separateness” that is usually associated with ecclesiastical rank on the basis of ordination, education, talent or charisma.²³ Whether framed as authority of purpose or erotic authority, this notion of power is operative in the words of the church’s mystics,

²¹ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 66. Authority of purpose can be contrasted with authority of office.

²² Ibid.

²³ Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 47. Incidentally, Smith is also influenced by Audre Lorde’s poetry.

visionaries and prophets who cannot or will not rely on institutional authorization.²⁴

Julian of Norwich can be included in this group.

Part II. Julian's Reliance on Erotic Authority

Julian does not have the luxury of institutional authorization and must rely to a large degree on the kind of self-authorization commonly found in mystical texts.²⁵ She has to speak in a way that makes God's voice manifest.²⁶ Like most preachers, Julian's authority is a montage and the various foundations for her power are revealed at different moments. Early on she speaks as an astonished seer, "And fully greatly was I astonned, for wonder and marvayle that I had, that he that is so reverent and so dreadful will be so homely with a sinful creature liveing in this wretched flesh" / "And I was astounded with wonder and admiration that he who is so holy and awe-inspiring was willing to be so familiar with a sinful being living in wretched flesh."²⁷ In this instance Julian seems to draw on visionary authority. Later, she is an expounder of spiritual truth who speaks with the authority of a pastor or teacher:

²⁴ Shawn Madigan, C.S.J., ed., *Mystics, Visionaries & Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 3-6.

²⁵ Karma Lochrie explains that a mystical text is not authorized the same way as a theological text and is to some extent self-authorized. Relying on de Certeau, she concludes, "The chief distinction between the mystical utterance and other modes which might be called theological is that the latter depend on construction of 'a particular coherent set of statements organized according to "truth" criteria,' while mystic utterance does not. . . . Unlike the other modes of medieval discourse, mystic discourse does not rely on the textual system of *auctoritas*. In other words, the mystical text does not rely on either textual or institutional authorization of its statements. Thus, the mystical text defines, identifies and authorizes itself differently than most other kinds of medieval discourse." Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1991), 61-62.

²⁶ Lochrie quotes Michel de Certeau who says the mystic is challenged by a predicament in which, "the divine utterance is both what founds the text, and what it must make manifest." Lochrie, 62-63.

²⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 135- 137; Spearing, 46.

And thus I saw full sekerly that it is redier to us and mor
esy to come to the knowing of God then to know oure
owne soule. For oure soule is so depe grounded in God,
and so endlessly tresored, that we may not come to the
knowing therof till we have furst knowing of God, which
is the maker to whome it is oned.²⁸

And thus I saw quite certainly that it is easier for us to
attain knowledge of God than to know our own soul; for
our soul is so deeply grounded in God, and so eternally
treasured, that we cannot attain knowledge of it until we
first know God, the Maker to whom it is united.²⁹

In another moment she heralds the power of Christ's blood with considerable zeal:

Beholde and see the vertu of this precious plenty of his
dereworthy blode! It descended downe into helle and
brak her bondes and deliverd them, all that were there
which belong to the courte of heven. The precious plenty
of his dereworthy blode overfloweth all erth, and is redy
to wash all creatures of sinne which be of good will, have
ben, and shall be. The precious plenty of his dereworthy
blode ascendeth up into heven in the blessed body of our
lorde Jesu Crist, and ther is in him, bleding, preying for us
to the father, and is and shal be as long as us nedeth.³⁰

Behold and see. The precious plenty of his beloved blood
descended into hell and burst their bonds and freed all
who were there who belonged to the court of heaven.
The precious plenty of his beloved blood overflows the
whole earth and is ready to wash away the sins of all
people of good will who are, have been or will be. The
precious plenty of his beloved blood ascended into heaven
to the blessed body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and there in
him it bleeds and intercedes for us with the Father - and
this shall be as long as there is need.³¹

²⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 301.

²⁹ Spearing, 133.

³⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 167.

³¹ Spearing, 60.

And in still another moment, she speaks to her audience as one would to a trusted confidant, “Bute I coulde telle it to no prest. For I thought: ‘How shulde a preste believe me?’”/ “but at that time I did not feel I could tell any priest about it, for I thought, ‘How could a priest believe me?’”³² Here, her authority is based largely on authenticity and transparency. In addition to her words, Julian’s authority is also conveyed in the anchorhold itself. The symbolic power of the building enables her to speak with the authority of a crone.³³ One can safely conclude that Julian’s authority has multiple dimensions. And yet, Julian’s voice as a lover is especially intriguing. This voice provides the most insight about her understanding of authority and her vision of the preaching task. It is also the place where her reliance on erotic authority is most apparent.

Rhetoric of Desire

The voice of the lover is actually evident at the very outset of *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love* when Julian recounts three petitions she made long before receiving the visions. In them, she asked for an experience of the passion, a sickness that would bring her to the brink of death, and three wounds: contrition, compassion, and longing for God.³⁴ Some members of Julian’s audience would immediately recognize the “rhetoric of desire” in these requests and assume she

³² Watson and Jenkins, 331-333; Spearing, 152.

³³ Liz Herbert McAvoy compares Julian to Sibyl who gains voice as her youthful body recedes. Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 207-208. Julian’s authority as crone resonates with Mary Catherine Hilker’s figure of the preacher as crone or wise woman who is ignored in the flurry of activity that can characterize a given family or community. Mary Catherine Hilker, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 183.

³⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 63-65, 125-129; Spearing, 3-4, 42-43.

was familiar with popular devotional texts associated with Bernard of Clairvaux.³⁵ In these texts, spiritual longing was valued as a sign of virtue, authorizing the person who demonstrated the longing to speak on spiritual matters.

There is a biblical rationale for Bernard's view. The history of salvation has love as its chief goal, and it is no exaggeration to call salvation history "a love story between God and his people, between God and his Church, between God and each person."³⁶ The words of the biblical authors are spoken out of love, and the Holy Scriptures can be seen as the "attractive wrapping on divine love."³⁷

For Bernard of Clairvaux, desire was a manifestation of love and not simply an emotional yearning to fill a psychological need.³⁸ God is understood to be present in desire itself, so having "desire for God is already a genuine manner of possessing him."³⁹ Julian maximizes the effects of the rhetoric of desire when she speaks as God's lover, for who has a greater longing for God and, thus, more authority than God's lover?

³⁵ Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25. Baker also notes that the rhetoric of desire is used by women associated with the *Brautmystik* in the German tradition. Overall, she suggests Julian's petition for contrition, compassion and longing for God are part of an affective spirituality program that was reflected in popular devotional writings at the time.

³⁶ In his introduction to selected writings by Bernard of Clairvaux, Dom Jean Leclercq continues saying, "God is the source, origin, and inspiration of the Bible- a belief that determines how it is read and utilized. God's love is self-revealing; it is expressed through the inspired authors and later through his Incarnate Son." Dom Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., introduction to *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works by Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Gillian R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 34.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 42.

³⁹ Ibid.

The magnitude of Julian's desire is demonstrated in her request and receipt of an illness that brings her to the brink of death and precipitates the visions.⁴⁰ Julian's illness also functions rhetorically as an indication of Julian's desire to glorify God. For her audience, the request signifies an effort to draw as close to God as possible in this life. A woman so intent on knowing God would more likely get a hearing even in a context in which women's speech was considered suspect.⁴¹

Given her hostile climate, it is not surprising that Julian has an extreme illness that catapults her preaching. Hers is not the only case in which illness and apparent death precede visionary experience. This pairing exists in the hagiographies of Catherine of Siena and Christina Mirabilis.⁴² Julian's illness is similarly a necessary

⁴⁰Both the request and the fulfillment of the request have unsettling dimensions. Before dismissing this exchange as internalized oppression or flawed theology, it is helpful to note that for Julian illness is not incommensurate with agency. In fact, the consoling power of *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love* stems in part from her insistence on the dignity of people who suffer. She is also resolute in her refusal to link human finitude with moral failure or weakness. Julian finds a unitive stream in pain that ties all suffering Christians to the suffering Christ, leading her to conclude, "I understode that we be now, in our lords mening, in his crosse with him in our paines and in our passion, dying." Watson and Jenkins, 193. Spearing translates this line as, "I understood that we are now, as our Lord intends it, dying with him on his cross in our pain and our passion." Spearing, 71. This depiction would register as Good News in Julian's grim context where war, banditry, famine and plague ravaged communities. Jane F. Maynard, *Transfiguring Loss: Julian of Norwich as a Guide for Survivors of Traumatic Grief* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 41-43.

⁴¹ Julian is facing longheld assumptions about women's inferiority as set forth in Origen's commentary on 1 Corinthians, "For it is improper for a woman to speak in an assembly, no matter what she says, even if she says admirable things or even saintly things; that is of little consequence since they come from the mouth of a woman. A woman speaking in an assembly—clearly this abuse is denounced as improper, an abuse for which the entire assembly is responsible." In *Forma Praedicandi*, a fourteenth-century text, Robert of Basevorn also offers a scathing dismissal, "Three things are necessary for one exercising the act of preaching: the first is purity of life, the second is competent knowledge (at least explicit knowledge of the articles of the Faith, the Ten Commandments, and the distinction between sin and non-sin), and the third is authority given by the Church. No lay person or religious, unless permitted by the Bishop or Pope, and no woman, no matter how learned or saintly, ought to preach." Eunjo Mary Kim, *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice through the Ages* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009) 50-51, 55.

⁴² Denise Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings*, 24-25. Baker goes on to cite Elizabeth Petroff who states, "A surprising number of biographies and autobiographies tell of an apparent dying, often when a

prelude to visionary experience and “is an extraordinary means of expressing her longing for union with God through either a mystical experience or actual death.”⁴³

In addition, Julian’s illness can be linked to the courtly love literature that was so popular in medieval England during her lifetime. In this genre, plot lines developed in which sickness was used to unite lovers and miraculous healing came through contact with one’s lover.⁴⁴ A saint’s longing for God was akin to lovesickness.⁴⁵ Memory of the Passion would only intensify this longing for union.⁴⁶ It is entirely reasonable, then, to read romantic resonances in the opening scene of Julian’s works in which she appears in a darkened room lying on her deathbed. This scene and several that follow present Julian in an authorized posture as God’s lover.⁴⁷

Illness is effective in conveying the depth of Julian’s desire but in her case it also carries an inherent problem: self-centeredness. As one imagines Julian lying in her darkened room, one can get the sense that the story is all about Julian and Jesus. The role of the church in this depiction is secondary at best. Christopher Abbott notices the

teenager, of being taken for dead and perhaps even put in a coffin, but then miraculously coming back to life, often with an explicit visionary message for the world.” Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 40. While Petroff and Baker focus on medieval women’s experience, it is worth noting that Rhode Island’s Jemima Wilkinson attests to a similar experience of death on October 4, 1776, and of resurrection as the androgynous “Public Universal Friend.” Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 80-82.

⁴³ Baker, 25.

⁴⁴ Jay Ruud, “‘I wolde for thy loue dye’: Julian, Romance Discourse, and the Masculine,” in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 192.

⁴⁵ Ibid. In the divine-human courtship the pain of separation from God was attributable to consciousness of sin. Denys Turner also discusses the lovesick lover in Julian’s work and he makes a connection to eschatology that I will take up later in this chapter. Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 146-147.

⁴⁶ Baker, 27.

⁴⁷ Ruud describes Julian’s role as that of “romance heroine.” Ruud, 191.

tension in this scene and describes it as one between “Julian and her personal fantasy Christ.”⁴⁸ He sees this moment as an essential part of Julian’s spiritual development in which she initially takes a posture that is privileged and driven by “unexamined enthusiasm.”⁴⁹ Julian’s understanding of herself as exceptional is “characteristic of her pre-visionary approach to Christ.”⁵⁰ The visions inaugurate a fundamental shift for Julian in which Christ becomes the central figure and she in turn becomes a “*responding self*” (emphasis in original).⁵¹

The church plays a critical role in Julian’s transformation because the church, through the action of the priest, presents the crucifix which will come alive for her and ultimately alter her consciousness.⁵² Through the bleeding crucifix, Julian is drawn deeper into the mystery of the Passion and into a new understanding of herself as a part of the collective body of Christ born through his side. Thus, Julian comes to desire not only the crucified body of Christ who speaks in her visions but the collective body of Christ of which she is a part. Her yearning for this collective body prompts the sharing of these visions despite considerable risk and it is in this longing to rejoice and engage

⁴⁸ Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 59.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 59. Abbott explains, “Notwithstanding the ostensible genuineness of her conscious pious intentions, or of her formal and explicit submission to God’s will, and perhaps above all the fact that she ingenuously seeks to number herself among ‘Cristis lovers’ (2.3), the picture that emerges in in Chapters 2 and 3 has Julian, not Christ, at the centre. The vehemence and extraordinariness of her desires suggest an energetic emotional drama in which Julian is the main actor. Chapter 2 especially can seem an exhausting litany of desire, almost every line containing some expression of Julian’s needs, wants or hopes, of which these are only a few: ‘I desired a bodily sight’; ‘for I would be one of them’; ‘frely desireing that sekenesse so harde as to deth’; ‘I would have no manner comfort of eardtly life’; ‘I desired to have all manier peynes bodily and ghostly’; ‘I desired to be soone with my God’ (all 2.3). Even in these few phrases we can detect a distinct note of extremity: ‘no manner comfort’; ‘all manier peynes.’”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 63.

with fellow Christians that Julian's reliance on erotic authority is most profound. No longer does she speak as the special Christian who desires God more than others do. The Julian who relied on ego, on an illness that elevated her above her fellow Christians gives way to a more spiritually evolved woman whose authority is rooted in kinship with other Christians. Julian, the lovesick lover, is healed and reborn through Christ's side as one of many faithful lovers.

Growing in faith is an erotic experience for Julian.⁵³ Her epiphany does not lead to an abandonment of desire but to an expansion of desire to include the community of Christ's lovers to which she belongs. Julian's preaching is actually founded on this mutual belonging and on the shared delight she assumes to be characteristic of the body of Christ. Accordingly, the purpose of her preaching is to stir desire and draw Christians into a richer experience of the love that unites them to one another and to God. The preacher-as-lover archetype is suited for this task of stirring desire in the church. In fact, as lover Julian is in accord with the preaching mystics who sought to stir the desire for God that is latent in all of creation.⁵⁴

⁵³ Karma Lochrie explains that "coming to know Christ" is ultimately "an erotic act," and the "place of mystical union and knowledge . . . is never quite free of erotic associations." Lochrie, 70.

⁵⁴ Martin Smith, *The Words for Passion: Preaching as the Meeting Place of Divine and Human Desire* (Washington, DC: College of Preachers, 1996), 12-13. I do not intend to confine Julian by making the term "mystic" applicable to her here. Richard Rolle, author of *The Fire of Love*, and Mechthild of Magdeburg, author of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, would certainly be included among the mystics who sought to stir desire for God.

Stirring Desire

Julian stirs desire for God in a number of ways. Sometimes she presents herself as a lover wooed by Jesus. She describes Jesus as an attractive man, “so fair a man was never none but he, tille what time that his fair coloure was changed with traveyle and sorrow, passion and dying”/ “never was man so fair as he until the time his fair colour was changed by his trouble and sorrow and his suffering and final agony.”⁵⁵ He is likewise “courteous,” a term she uses at least nineteen times to describe him, and this is an adjective that should not be read as implying mere politeness.⁵⁶ “It is the chief characteristic of the knight/lover and is generally both the result of his love and the quality that makes him most worthy of being loved.”⁵⁷ Christ’s courtesy “establishes him as a romance hero.”⁵⁸

Julian presents Jesus as well-dressed. At the end of the Parable of the Lord and the Servant, a portion of *A Revelation of Love* that is of special importance because Julian spends so many years trying to understand the symbolism, Christ is dressed in clothes that are “newly beautiful, white and bright and eternally pure, full and ample, fairer and richer than the clothing which I saw on the Father, for that clothing was blue, and Christ’s clothing is now of a comely, handsome mixture which is so wonderful that I

⁵⁵ Watson and Jenkins, 161; Spearing, 56.

⁵⁶ Ruud, 188.

⁵⁷ Ruud, 188.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Ruud also explains that Christ possesses virtues like patience, peace and compassion that are generally deemed feminine in the medieval context. Possessing these traits does not feminize him, but instead universalizes the feminine attributes. Ruud, 188-189.

cannot describe it; for it is all glory.”⁵⁹ Julian’s Jesus is simply captivating. Her depiction of Jesus as a lover intent on wooing his beloved is also featured in *Ancrene Wisse*. In one representative excerpt from *Ancrene Wisse*, the anchoress was to imagine Jesus comparing himself to other suitors:

Am I not the fairest one? Am I not the richest king? Am I not the highest born? Am I not the wisest among the rich? Am I not the most courteous among men? Am I not the most generous one? For one says of a generous man who can keep nothing back, that his hands are pierced- as mine are. Am I not of all things the gentlest and sweetest?⁶⁰

Julian points to this sweetness when she describes Jesus wooing the church through his open side. His gaping side wound reveals a heart that has been severed into two halves. This image of the “Sacred Heart,” the source of healing blood and water, is an especially powerful sight. Julian underscores its importance by repeating the line Christ speaks to her, “Lo, how I loved the” or rather, “Look how much I loved you.”⁶¹ The point here is that Jesus is a worthy suitor—worthy of the audience’s devotion as well as Julian’s.⁶² And yet, Julian does not simply extol Jesus’ virtues in the abstract or offer an academic discourse on the divine nature. She takes on the voice of Christ’s lover and erotic authority suits this approach.

⁵⁹ Spearing, 124; Watson and Jenkins, 287.

⁶⁰ *Ancrene Wisse*, 194. Note also the similarity to Jesus’ speech in one of Julian’s visions, “It is I who am highest; it is I you love; it is I who delight you; it is I you serve; it is I you long for; it is I you desire; it is I who am your purpose; it is I who am everything; it is I that Holy Church preaches and teaches you; it is I who showed myself to you before.” Spearing, 20-21, Watson and Jenkins, 91.

⁶¹ Watson and Jenkins, 203; Spearing, 76.

⁶² It is important to note that the figure of Christ as romance hero also plays into an aristocratic worldview in which readers are encouraged to identify with the gentry. The genre includes elements that would have been empowering for women (such as the emphasis on women’s desire, beauty, subjectivity and freedom of choice) as well as more confining elements that require women to be silent and submissive to both God and men. Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 84-85.

Julian's audience gets a sign that she is not relying on traditional authority when she uses frank sexual imagery to stir desire for God. At one point the wooing Jesus turns to Julian and asks her, "Arte thou welle apaide?" meaning "Are you satisfied?"⁶³ Jay Ruud reads this question as Julian's explicit attempt to present Christ as the ideal lover.⁶⁴ The earnestness of Christ's question becomes clearer as he continues, "'If thou arte apaid, I am apaide'- as if he had saide: 'It is joy and liking enough to me, and I aske not elles of the for my travayle but that I might apaye the'"/ "'If you are pleased, I am pleased,' as if he said, 'It is joy and delight enough to me, and I ask nothing more of you for my hardship but that I give you pleasure.'"⁶⁵ This particular interchange, when added to the many romantic references that flow through Julian's work, leads Ruud to conclude that Julian speaks as "the female speaker and lover of God" who "addresses her visions to all those 'that will be his faithfull lovers.'"⁶⁶ So, leaning on Ruud's conclusion, by sharing this portion of her vision Julian is, first, glorifying Christ as the ideal lover; second, affirming her own authority to speak as the beloved; and third, inviting others to live as Christ's lovers.⁶⁷

⁶³ Watson and Jenkins, 199; Spearing, 75. Spearing translates the phrase in question as, "Are you well pleased?"

⁶⁴ Ruud, 193.

⁶⁵ Watson and Jenkins, 199; Spearing, 75. Ruud also discusses this exchange in depth. Ruud, 193. This exchange is the second one where Jesus asks Julian if she is satisfied. The first occurs in Chapter 22 of the Long Text, Watson and Jenkins, 193; Spearing, 72.

⁶⁶ Ruud, 202. Ruud also notes significant power dynamics and says Julian "reverses the conventional roles of the courtly romance." Ruud, 193.

⁶⁷ Liz Herbert McAvoy has a different reading of the question, "Arte how welle apaide?" She sees the interchange as a transactional one, suggesting Julian is resting on multiple shades of meaning in the term, "payede." These meanings include to 'satisfy,' to 'settle a debt,' and to 'gratify the flesh.' In McAvoy's view, the result is a redeemed image of the commoditized female body. McAvoy states that "both female and Christic suffering are depicted in terms of an economic principle which is of benefit to both giver and

Julian's use of sexual imagery to stir desire for God also arises as she outlines her diabolology. The fiend is depicted with human-like features but bright red skin and scars reminiscent of the bubonic plague. He comes to dominate Julian, placing his red paws on her throat.⁶⁸ His red face eerily evokes Christ's bloody face and his hair similarly evokes Christ's garland of blood and hair.⁶⁹ Like Jesus, the fiend is also in her bedroom. Julian's sexual undertones emphasize his proximity, the magnitude of his threat, and his brute manner. In this sense the fiend is a clear contrast to the courteous Christ. He appears as the lying lover who acts with aggression, domination, and control.⁷⁰ There is nothing magnetic about Julian's portrayal of the fiend, nothing to increase curiosity about him. On the whole, his presence is only ominous and revolting enough to serve as a foil for Christ's beauty.

So far I have explored Julian's explicit use of the lover archetype to stir desire for God. Yet, Julian's use of the archetype is not limited to these direct references. She also uses the archetype in more subtle ways that yield an even fuller picture of the kind of credibility she seeks to establish. Specifically, Julian demonstrates a lover's attention, restlessness, risk, and captivated reason. I will discuss each of these features in turn.

recipient(s), whose roles merge as giving and receiving become indistinguishable in this context of mutual benefit." Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 163-164.

⁶⁸ Ruud, 195-196.

⁶⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 332.

⁷⁰ Ruud, 197-198. It is important to note, however, that Julian's depiction of the fiend seems to play on anti-Semitic stereotypes that were common in medieval England. These stereotypes portrayed Jews as hairy, hyper-virile, and prone to emit a strong smell associated with lust. Julian's fiend has side locks and Jay Ruud notes that it is difficult to explain this portrayal as anything other than anti-Semitic. He notes that medieval Norwich had a Jewish ghetto and ritual killing of Jews took place in the town. Ruud, 199, 204-205, citing Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 11-52.

Demonstrating a Lover's Attention

A lover's authority grows out of the quality of attention she directs to the beloved. Little things that non-intimates overlook register as significant for the lover. Julian speaks with the authority of one who has this adoring attention. As she relays the vision of the crucifixion she attends to the details of his suffering as only an intimate can. She notices the ashen lips, the clogged nostril, and the drops of spittle on his face.⁷¹ Upon seeing his suffering on the cross, Julian stands in the shoes of one whose lover is being tortured:

But of alle paines that leed to salvation, this is the most:
to se thy love suffer. How might ony paine be more then
to see him that is alle my life, alle my blisse, and alle my
joy suffer? Here felt I sothfastly that I loved Crist so much
above myselfe that ther was no paine that might be
suffered like to that sorrow that I had to see him in
paine.⁷²

But of all the pains which lead to salvation, this is the
greatest pain: to see your love suffer. How could any pain
be greater to me than to see him who is my whole life, all
my bliss and all my joy, suffering? Here I truly felt that I
loved Christ so much more than myself that there was no
pain that could be suffered comparable to the sorrow I felt
to see him in pain.⁷³

The sight of the crucifixion is a visceral experience for Julian and is intended to be as equally intense for her audience. The audience is brought to the crucifixion through the

⁷¹ Watson and Jenkins, 77, 83, and 179. Spearing, 12, 15, and 64.

⁷² Watson and Jenkins, 183-185. Julian understands Jesus to have a "love-longing to have us all togeder, hole in him to his endlesse blisse." Watson and Jenkins, 219.

⁷³ Spearing, 67.

eyes of the beloved, prompting them to see themselves as intimately tied to the holy victim. As lover, Julian invites her audience into a deeper intimacy with Christ.

Julian also reflects a lover's attention in her exegetical approach. She maintains a posture of beholding and is never satisfied enough to turn away from the vision. She is still digesting the visions some twenty years later and moving through the four levels of meaning: the literal, the allegorical, the tropological or moral, and the anagogical or mystical.⁷⁴ Her tendency to ruminate on a word or phrase and allow the meaning to marinate in the soul suggests familiarity with *lectio divina*.⁷⁵ Julian seeks God with an unhurried delight that carries over in word and vision.⁷⁶ An erotic quality pervades both.

Demonstrating a Lover's Restlessness

As lover, Julian takes the license to narrate God's action in the soul. For example, Julian's seventh revelation consists of alternating periods of joy and sorrow. During the joyful moments, serenity floods her soul such that she "might have saide with Saint Paule: 'Nothing shalle departe me fro the charite of Crist,'" and during the

⁷⁴ Veronica Rolf suggests that Julian learned these four levels of meaning as well as how to select *thema* and *exempla* from popular homilists. Veronica Rolf, *Julian's Gospel: Illuminating the Life and Revelations of Julian of Norwich* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 182. Julian discusses her long period of reflection on the visions in connection with the Parable of the Lord and the Servant. Lynn Staley reads this disclosure about the time spent studying the visions as evidence of Julian's desire to take on the authority of both "seer and exegete." Julian "heightens our sense of her growing critical acumen by describing her initial confusion about the nature of the vision. Like any painstaking exegete, Julian presents herself as spending years trying to decipher the meaning of the text before her." Lynn Staley, "Julian of Norwich and the Late Fourteenth-Century Crisis of Authority," in *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* by David Aers and Lynn Staley (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 161-162.

⁷⁵ Rolf, 182.

⁷⁶ Denis Turner even says Julian speaks of love as seeking or eros. Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 146.

sorrowful moments she cannot bear the weight of life and “might have said with Saint Peter: ‘Lord, save me, I perish.’”⁷⁷ *Ancrene Wisse* and *The Chastising* call this alternation between ease and struggle “the pley of love” and it points to the presence and absence of Christ, lover of the soul.⁷⁸ Yearning for the divine presence is heightened in the playful exchange. By sharing her experience with the play of love, Julian encourages her audience to persevere during periods of spiritual angst. Her credibility is supported by her sensitivity to the subtleties of divine action. She is, as Audre Lorde suggests, informed by feeling rather than numb to its insights.⁷⁹ Julian also uses her voice to increase listeners’ power to connect with others—a feature of erotic authority.⁸⁰

It is true that Julian’s discussion of the play of love draws on the authority of personal experience, but she shifts from the particulars of her own life into a more general stance in which she talks more broadly about “Goddess wille.”⁸¹ In her account of the play of love, Julian assumes the authority to discuss Christ’s relationship with the church. This move places her in the realm of subject matter that would ordinarily be limited to clerics.

The play of love grounds Julian’s authority on still another level. Julian uses it to tap into a lover’s restlessness, that sense of intense longing while the beloved is away and bliss when the lover is near. This restless posture is similar to the restlessness Christians experience as they await the *eschaton*. Denys Turner explains the similarities:

⁷⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 177.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 174.

⁷⁹ Lorde, 58.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁸¹ Watson and Jenkins, 177; Spearing, 64.

The atmospherics of erotic tension that so dominate the text of the Song of Songs- the rapid narrative shifts back and forth between beholding in contemplative oneness the presence of the beloved, and languishing, “sick with love,” in separation, with a consequent yearning for his or her return—these exactly match the monks’ sense of their specific eschatological situation, set between time and eternity, in the regio dissimilitudinis, the “land of exile,” “unfamiliarity,” and homelessness of which Bernard of Clairvaux spoke.⁸²

So, erotic tension and eschatological tension have a similar emphasis on unfulfilled desire.⁸³ Moreover, by dwelling on the erotic, Julian helps her listeners see themselves as situated between time and eternity. Since Julian is formed by Augustine, her eschatology is not preoccupied with a future end time but instead emphasizes the distinction between time (whether past, present or future) and eternity.⁸⁴ Sound eschatology enables Julian to expand her listeners’ understanding of their own in-between state and recognize it as a fundamental part of what it means to be in the church.

It makes sense then, for Julian to devote a considerable amount of energy to narrating the relationship between Christ and the church. She describes the intensity, beauty, and complexity of this relationship:

⁸² Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 146.

⁸³ Denys Turner’s explanation about how the erotic and the eschatological come together for Julian is helpful. He explains, “Contemplatives like Julian saw themselves as poised on an eschatological cusp formed by the convergence of the ‘now’ of time and the ‘not yet’ of eternity. And the dynamics of eros, and so of seeking, form a perfect match with that eschatological tension, thus giving the vocabulary of erotic tension a natural place within the monastic conception of the contemplative life.” Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 147.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 155. Turner suggests there is a “double dimension” of time for both Augustine and Julian wherein, “On one axis, memory grounds time’s possibility as such, and so it grounds time’s one-directional trajectory through past and present to future; and on the other, it is memory’s construction of time that eternity eschatologically intersects with time’s every moment.”

For notwithstanding that oure lorde God wonneth now in us, and is here with us, and halseth us and becloseth us for tender love that he may never leve us, and is more nere to us than tonge may telle or harte may thinke, yet maye we never stinte of morning ne of weping, nor of seking nor of longing, till whan we se him clere in his blisseful chere.⁸⁵

For although our Lord God lives in us and is here with us, embracing and enfolding us completely for tender love, so that he can never leave us, and is nearer to us than tongue can tell or heart can think, yet our lamentation and weeping and longing can never stop till we see his blessed face clearly.⁸⁶

Julian makes her listeners aware of a longing that unites them to Christ and one another. Sometimes she uses direct declarations from Jesus about this union, such as, “I love the and thou lovest me, and oure love shall never be deperted on tow, and for thy profite I suffer”/ “I love you and you love me; and our love shall not be divided, and I suffer for your profit.”⁸⁷ At other times, Julian relies on imagery to bring the depth of the union to life, as manifested in her use of spousal imagery, “God enjoyeth that he is our very spouse, and our soule his loved wife”/ “God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and our soul is his much-loved bride.”⁸⁸ The sheer volume of references like these reveals a clear emphasis on the mutual love between Christ and the church and an attempt to ground listeners’ identity in this loving relationship with God. In addition,

⁸⁵ Watson and Jenkins, 347.

⁸⁶ Spearing, 160.

⁸⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 375; Spearing, 175. In this chapter, Julian also asserts that the faithful are continually protected in their falling and rising, though she describes the devout person as a “lover of God,” or, in the Middle English version, “liver.”

⁸⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 289; Spearing, 125. While Julian regularly relies on romance imagery, her references to spousal imagery are sparse in comparison. One occurs at the end of the Parable of the Lord and the Servant, “Now is the spouse, Goddes son, in pees with his loved wife, which is the fair maiden of endlesse joy”/ “Now the spouse, God’s son, is at peace with his beloved bride, who is the fair Virgin of eternal joy.” Watson and Jenkins, 287-289; Spearing, 124. Watson and Jenkins include a note explaining that Julian is alluding to the Song of Songs and to the common understanding of Christ as spouse and the church or soul as his bride.

Julian affirms the agency in this relationship and sets this union apart as one defined by freedom and delight. In this respect Julian is, along the lines of Audre Lorde, speaking out of her sense of connection to her listeners and underlining the human capacity for joy.⁸⁹

Demonstrating a Lover's Willingness to Risk

The lover archetype allows Julian to embrace a posture of risk. Both Julian and her audience are aware that her proclamation is accompanied by considerable risk. The closing annotation to *A Revelation of Love*, presumably composed by a scribe, conveys anxiety about the misinterpretation of her work:

I pray almyty God that this booke com not but to the hands of them that will be his faithfull lovers, and to those that will submitt them to the feith of holy church, and obey the holesom understandyng and teching of the men that be of vertuous life, sadde age, and profound lernyng. For this revelation is hey divinitye and hey wisdom, wherefore it may not dwelle with him that is thrall to synne and to the devill. And beware thou take not on thing after thy affection and liking and leve another, for that is the condition of an heretique. But take everything with other. And truly understonden, all is according to holy scripture and growndid in the same; and that Jhesus, our very love, light, and truth shall shew to all clen soules that with mekenes aske perseverantly this wisdom of hym.⁹⁰

I pray to almighty God that this book come only into the hands of those who want to love him faithfully, and to

⁸⁹ In Julian's case, the connection is rooted in the identity she shares with other members of the body of Christ. Lorde, 56-57.

⁹⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 415; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 297. Kerby-Fulton describes the scribe's caveat as atypical.

those who are willing to submit themselves to the faith of Holy Church and obey the sound understanding and teaching of men of virtuous life, grave years, and profound learning; for this revelation is deep theology and great wisdom, so it must not remain with anyone who is thrall to sin and the Devil. And beware that you do not take one thing according to your taste and fancy and leave another, for that is what heretics do. But take everything together and truly understand that everything is in accordance with holy scripture and grounded in it, and Jesus our true love, light and truth will show this wisdom concerning himself to all pure souls who ask for it humbly and perseveringly.⁹¹

The scribe does not name the potential consequences of interpretation in this closing note, but by 1401, English law provided for the arrest of heretics and the subsequent burning of those who refused to recant their heresies.⁹² Short of formal proceedings, Julian might have considered the damage that might ensue from criticism or public scrutiny. These more informal challenges presented legitimate risks given that she was very likely dependent on her community for financial support of her anchorhold.⁹³

Both *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love* demonstrate consciousness of risk. In *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* this consciousness is revealed in the justifications Julian offers for sharing the visions: “I am sekere I sawe it for the profitte of many oder”/ “I am sure that I saw it for the advantage of many others;” “Botte I wate wele, this that I saye I hafe it of the shewing of him that es soverayne techare”/ “But I know well that I have received what I say from him who is the supreme teacher;” and “Botte for I am a woman shulde I therfore leve that I shulde

⁹¹ Spearing, 180.

⁹² Lynn Staley discusses *de heretic comburendo* in her examination of Julian’s authority. Staley, 126. Kerby-Fulton also notes that orthodoxy was not just required of written works but visual ones as well. Kerby-Fulton, 317.

⁹³ Staley, 130.

nought telle yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I sawe in that same time that it is his wille that it be knawen?”/ “Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time both his goodness and his wish that it should be known?”⁹⁴ Phrases like these reveal Julian as one who is aware of tension but willing to move forward because she is compelled by love.⁹⁵ I believe Lynn Staley is correct when she describes *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* as an act in which Julian steps into an arena and expects to be held accountable for her speech.⁹⁶

While the direct references to her own gender are eliminated from *A Revelation of Love*, the stakes are raised when she incorporates femininity into the Trinity through the maternal image of Jesus.⁹⁷ Carefulness pervades this work as a whole as she takes on greater risks. For example, Julian devotes considerable attention to the tension between individual experience and orthodox teaching—a focus that makes clear declarations of orthodoxy essential.⁹⁸ These statements of fidelity and obedience are also necessary because she seeks to unify personal experience and church teaching rather than simply subvert her experience to church doctrine.⁹⁹ The erotic, then, is not merely tied to overt moments when Julian speaks as a lover but also emerges more subtly in her insistence on weaving binaries together.¹⁰⁰ She envisions “a radical

⁹⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 73-75; Spearing, 10-11.

⁹⁵ Julian makes it quite clear that charity stirs her to speak. Watson and Jenkins, 75; Spearing, 11.

⁹⁶ Staley, 117.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 174.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 163-164.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 147.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 148.

alternative to the punitory figure of authority” and this new alternative never allows her to fully transcend vulnerability.¹⁰¹ Instead, Julian grounds herself in vulnerability and risk and speaks as one who is actively relying on God’s grace. Her love outweighs her fear.¹⁰²

Demonstrating a Lover’s Captivated Reason

The intellect plays an essential role in Julian’s labors and shades her authority from the start. Julian’s opening petitions include a request for “mind of the passion.”¹⁰³ And indeed, as Denys Turner explains, this prayer is answered by a “theological predicament,” a series of visions marked by paradox that “both demanded and resisted harmonic resolution.”¹⁰⁴ *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love* are invitations into a conundrum of love; they lead the audience into an experience of adoration (as noted above) as well as rigorous theological reflection.¹⁰⁵

To varying degrees, the visions challenge and affirm church teaching and send Julian and her audience into a relentless interrogation process. This journey also proves to be a form of wooing. A number of late medieval affectivists like Thomas Gallus

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Alice Walker says she wants to hear the voices of those “whose love outweighs their fear” in her introduction to Mumia Abu-Jamal’s *All Things Censored* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000), 16.

¹⁰³ Watson and Jenkins, 125. Spearing translates this phrase as “vivid perception of his Passion.” Spearing, 42.

¹⁰⁴ Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, xiii. Turner makes it clear that the paradox is rooted in the cross, saying, “For Julian saw therein at once a revelation of an omnipotent and utterly reckless love and its apparent defeat by sin. In Christ on the Cross she saw hope, rational and theological, apparently in ruins. On the one hand, then, the Cross is her predicament. On the other, she is told that all the answer to her predicament, the only one she is to be given, is contained in that same bodily sight—the solution is in the problem. There are no further resources for an explanation, there is no place else to go other than where the problem is, in the Cross of Christ.”

¹⁰⁵ It is also helpful to note that reason is something of a power in the medieval church. By playing with the limits of reason, Julian is also pointing to the limits of human power.

Vercellensis, Hugh of Balma, and Jean Gerson, agree that the theologian must experience the “incapacitation of intellect.”¹⁰⁶ He or she must come to the end of the powers of reason and enter a “mystical darkness” which love interrupts.¹⁰⁷ So the intellect plays an indispensable role in deepening piety but in the end, God is known by love.¹⁰⁸

Along this line, Julian’s reasoning ability serves her to an extent, as demonstrated in her style, argumentative skill and uses of sources. Ultimately, however, reason is put to the service of love.¹⁰⁹ Julian speaks as one who is delightfully tangled in the enigma of Christ’s love and drawing others into this mystery is both an affective and cognitive endeavor. It follows, then, that even Julian’s theological questions propel her audience deeper into the mystery of God’s love. It is the preacher as lover who asks, “A, good lorde, how might alle be wele for the gret harme that is

¹⁰⁶ Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 77.

¹⁰⁷ Drawing on Gregory the Great, Turner sums this mystery up by saying, “For *amor ipse notitia est*, love is itself a kind of knowing, of which intellect can know nothing.” Ibid., 77-78.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. The medieval conception of the intellect is more complex than the contemporary North American understanding, and Turner touches on this difference in his discussion.

¹⁰⁹ Ellen Babinsky offers a helpful insight on the role of reason on the spiritual path. Speaking of Marguerite Porete, a fourteenth-century beguine, Babinsky says, “For Marguerite, Reason and Love are personified acts, and each has an intellect appropriate to its function, which allows to each its own kind of knowledge. Reason has a specific and positive role in the quest for spiritual perfection; namely, that reasoning activity guides the will with a particular kind of perceptiveness, a particular way of grasping what is before the mind. Reason, through the virtues, teaches the will the important preliminary steps of evangelical perfection in the first four stages. The soul would make no progress toward perfection without this guidance. Reason and the virtues carefully teach a particular kind of knowledge to the soul, molding her ability and thus producing the sort of intellect that can allow the soul to make further progress. The will, in order to be what it ought to be, must first be guided by Reason to learn its proper object, the will of God, so that ability may fulfill its enterprise and generate the intellect by which the soul may progress along the path toward perfection. Reason’s intellect is limited, however, because it is part of created being and cannot grasp the teachings of the intellect of divine love and Reason is thus servant to her mistress, Divine Love. . . She cannot accompany the soul into the splendid palace of divine understanding but must remain outside the gate.” Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Translated and introduced by Ellen L. Babinsky (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 34.

come by sinne to thy creatures?”/ “Ah, my good Lord, how could all be well, given the great harm that has been done to humankind by sin?”¹¹⁰ As she struggles with this question and others like it, the intensity of her desire combines with the limits of her reason and pushes Julian to her boiling point:

My longing endured, him continuantly beholding. And yet,
I culde have no patience for gret feer and perplexite,
thinking: ‘If I take it thus, that we be no sinners nor no
blameworthy, it semeth as I shulde erre and faile of
knowing of this soth. And if it be tru that we be sinners
and blameworthy, good lorde, how may it than be that I
can not see this sothnes in the, which arte my God, my
maker, in whom I desyer to se alle truth? . . . I cryde
inwardly with all my might, seeking into God for helpe,
mening thus: ‘A, lorde Jhesu, kind of blisse, how shall I be
esede? Who shall tell me and tech me that me nedeth to
wit, if I may not at this time se it in the?’¹¹¹

My longing endured as I looked continually towards him,
and yet my trouble and perplexity were so great that I
could not be patient, thinking, ‘If I suppose that we are not
sinners nor do we deserve blame, my good Lord, how can
it then be that I cannot see this certainty in you, who are
my God, my Maker, in whom I long to see all truths? . . . I
cried inwardly with all my might, beseeching God for help,
thinking as follows: ‘Ah! Lord Jesus, king of bliss, how can I
be helped? Who can show me and tell me what I need to
know if I cannot see it now in you?’¹¹²

Here it is clear that Julian is not simply stirring piety; she is stirring desire and reason plays an instrumental role in this desire. Desire comes with urgency, engagement, and willingness to question. Desire presses against the fences of orthodoxy in its loving

¹¹⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 213; Spearing, 81.

¹¹¹ Watson and Jenkins, 273.

¹¹² Spearing, 114-115. The conundrum is never entirely resolved. Julian gets an opaque answer in the form of an exemplum, a standard component of a late medieval sermon. In her case, the exemplum is the Parable of the Lord and the Servant. This parable momentarily eases Julian’s exasperation but in both mind and heart she remains locked in the puzzle of the cross some twenty years later.

pursuit of God. In fact, Julian's declarations of fidelity to the institutional church and to its teachings are necessary not only because she is writing in the vernacular, but also because of her willingness to follow her desire for God wherever it leads. She is willing to follow this desire even when it seems to move beyond the pale of orthodoxy and hover on the edges of intelligibility.

A Revelation of Love itself is something of a compromise between love and reason because Julian struggles to find language to relate the complexity of what she has experienced:

All this was shewde by thre partes: that is to sey, by bodily sight, and by worde formede in my understanding, and by gostely sight. But the gostely sight I can not ne may not shew it as openly ne as fully as I would.¹¹³

All this was shown in three ways: that is to say, by bodily sight, and by words formed in my understanding, and by spiritual sight. But I neither can nor may show the spiritual vision as openly or as fully as I would like to.¹¹⁴

According to Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, the references to "can," "may," and "would" correlate to memory, reason, and will, the three powers of the mind.¹¹⁵ Julian repeats this declaration of her limits in Chapter 73 of *A Revelation of Love*, and the effect is to underscore the idea that she is caught in a bind that calls on both her intellect and her emotions.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Ibid., 157.

¹¹⁴ Spearing, 54.

¹¹⁵ Watson and Jenkins, 156.

¹¹⁶ Watson and Jenkins, 351; Spearing, 161.

Julian makes it clear that the visions prompt something of a “crisis” of love.¹¹⁷

This crisis cannot be resolved or made intelligible but it is nevertheless the soul’s delight. She invites her listeners into this disorienting experience of love with the expectation that they will ultimately enjoy spiritual union, or “oneing.”¹¹⁸ As the term suggests, this is an erotic experience and the ultimate end of Christian life.

A Lover’s Dilemma

As a preacher, Julian has a dilemma. She experiences some pressure to make an organized, coherent argument about her vision and its implications. Yet the visions and the spiritual and emotional content they carry defy language.¹¹⁹ I would describe this as the quintessential preaching dilemma. The gospel is the fiery ball of wonder, horror, beauty, and hope that seeks articulation in human language and the preacher struggles to reconcile the two. The struggle is reminiscent of the lover’s quandary, for how can the lover find language that does not to some degree betray the depth of feeling or the beauty of the beloved? The Monk of Farne describes the tension:

O love, you are indeed rash, violent, fragrant, impetuous,
and brooking consideration of naught but yourself, you
eschew all else and despise everything, content with
yourself alone. You subvert order, disregard custom,
recognize no measure. All that propriety, reason, self-
respect, deliberation and judgement would seem to

¹¹⁷ A similar spiritual crisis is described in J. Louis Martyn’s *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 108. Martyn’s description of Paul’s “epistemological crisis” differs from Julian’s crisis in that she places more emphasis on the roles of longing, delight and union.

¹¹⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 259; Spearing, 104.

¹¹⁹ Lochrie says, “The mystical text doubly affirms its own place *outside* the magisterium language and its own complementarity to that language.” Lochrie, 64.

demand you triumph over, and reduce to captivity within
your grasp.¹²⁰

Lovers and preachers are in equal parts tormented and exhilarated by language. This struggle might be eased for either group if the task simply involved testifying to static truths, but both are invested in beckoning the audience into a living reality of love, a dynamic that is continuing to evolve and becoming ever more beautiful and complex.¹²¹ Lovers and preachers are pressed by an experience of extremity and a mandate for constraint (for without some measure of constraint articulation is impossible). To make matters still more difficult, neither the lover nor the preacher can speak objectively of the beloved. Both are called to speak of one who envelops his or her identity and sense of destiny, the one who redefines the sublime and the abject. For both the lover and the preacher, the sublime and the abject become essential tools for relaying meaning and inevitably lead to “extravagant speech,” the only language that comes close to communicating as intended.¹²²

The extravagance of a preacher’s encounter with the divine inevitably shapes his or her speech. For Bernard of Clairvaux, extravagance is at work in his sermon on a line from Song of Songs, “Your name is perfume poured out.”¹²³ Extravagance is manifested in a crescendo of names for Jesus.¹²⁴ When the Holy Name is not just heard but actually experienced in the soul the result is extravagant expression or high praise, what Karma

¹²⁰ Lochrie, 68.

¹²¹ Along a similar line of argument, Lochrie says, “The mystic is more interested in the word as event, rather than as textual relic of an ancient truth.” Lochrie, 64.

¹²² Lochrie, 66.

¹²³ Song of Songs 1:3 NRSV; Lochrie, 66.

¹²⁴ Lochrie, 66.

Lochrie describes as the transfusion between flesh and speech.¹²⁵ As Lochrie explains, “Experience of the Name in the soul and the affections produces an extravagant litany of naming, of searching for new words and idioms for God, Christ, and the Trinity. The Name itself permits such extravagance, such expression.”¹²⁶ Julian is similarly swept into this mode of expression, though she places the words of adoration on the lips of Jesus:

I it am that is hiaste. I it am that thowe luffes. I it am that thowe likes. I it am that thowe serves. I it am that thowe langes. I it am that thowe desires. I it am that thowe menes. I it am that is alle. I it am that haly kyrke preches the and teches the. I it am that shewed me are to the.¹²⁷

It is I who am highest; it is I you love; it is I who delight you; it is I you serve; it is I you long for; it is I you desire; it is I who am your purpose; it is I who am everything; it is I that Holy Church preaches and teaches you; it is I who showed myself to you before.¹²⁸

This litany is stirred by an extravagant experience of love. For Julian, God’s love is hardly tame; it is unwieldy enough to birth her visions and a lifelong journey of reflection about their meaning. Julian is never able to mine the extent of this love as her closing lines of *A Revelation of Love* make clear:

‘What, woldest thou wit thy lordes mening in this thing?
Wit it wele, love was his mening. Who shewed it the?
Love. What shewid he the? Love. Wherefore shewed he it
the? For love. Holde the therin, thou shalt wit more in the

¹²⁵ Ibid. In *The Dream of God: A Call to Return*, Verna Dozier puts it more bluntly, “Our theologians have rushed to make the transrational rational, to make prose out of poetry. Yet theology has to be in the language of poetry because no other language can contain the extravagance of the idea.” Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1991), 19.

¹²⁶ Lochrie, 66.

¹²⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 91.

¹²⁸ Spearing, 20-21.

same. But thou shalt never wit therein other withouten ende.' Thus was I lerned that love is oure lordes mening. And I sawe fulle sekerly in this and in alle, that or God made us he loved us, which love was never sleked, ne never shalle. And in this love he hath done alle his werkes, and in this love he that made alle thinges profitable to us. And in this love oure life is everlasting. In oure making we had beginning, but the love wherin he made us was in him fro without beginning, in which love we have oure beginning. And alle this shalle we see in God withouten ende. Deo gracias.¹²⁹

'Do you want to know what your Lord meant? Know well that love was what he meant. Who showed you this? Love. What did he show? Love. Why did he show it to you? For love. Hold fast to this and you will know and understand more of the same; but you will never understand or know from it anything else for all eternity.' This is how I was taught that our Lord's meaning was love. And I saw quite certainly in this and in everything that God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall. And all his works were done in this love; and in this love he has made everything for our profit; and in this love our life is everlasting. We had our beginning when we were made; but the love in which he made us was in him since before time began; and in this love we have our beginning. And all this shall be seen in God without end, which may Jesus grant us. Amen.¹³⁰

Rather than just a message of love, Julian's words convey a message of supreme love, of extremity. An engagement with extremity sits at the heart of the preaching task for her. Further, Julian's mode of preaching requires claiming the authority to speak this extremity and draw others into it. For this aspect of Julian's preaching, a surprising role model emerges: the Virgin Mary.

¹²⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 379-381.

¹³⁰ Spearing, 179.

Like Julian, Mary has divine encounters marked by extremity. Julian reminds her listeners of the first of these encounters with a reference to the Annunciation. In fact, the first voice from scripture that Julian introduces is Mary's, "Lo me here, Gods handmaiden"/ "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord."¹³¹ This is a line that Mary voices while in a state of awe. Julian amplifies the extremity of this moment by using repetition, pun, and alliteration with the letter "m:"

For this was her marvayling: that he that was her maker
would be borne of her that was made. And this wisdom
and truth, knowing the greatnes of her maker and the
littlehead of herselfe that is made, made her to say full
meekely to Gabriel: 'Lo me here, Gods handmaiden.'¹³²

[H]ow reverently she marvelled that he chose to be born
of her, a simple creature of his own making. And this
wisdom and faithfulness, knowing as she did the greatness
of her Maker and the littleness of her who was made,
moved her to say very humbly to Gabriel, 'Behold, the
handmaid of the Lord.'¹³³

With these rhetorical devices, Julian manages to mark Mary's entrance into the visions even as she emphasizes the Virgin's meekness. The net effect for the audience is a vivid depiction of Mary marveling at God's revelation.

This portrayal of Mary's extremity is striking, but it also reflects considerable discipline.¹³⁴ Comparatively, Catherine of Siena and Mechthild of Magdeburg have much more to say about the Virgin Mary than Julian does. Julian's trim references to Mary are

¹³¹ Watson and Jenkins, 137; Spearing, 46.

¹³² Watson and Jenkins, 136-137.

¹³³ Spearing, 46.

¹³⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 90.

strategic.¹³⁵ This limited treatment parallels the parameters Julian places on her own role. Early on in *A Revelation of Love*, she tells readers to “leve the behaldinge” of the messenger (in this case Julian) and focus on God.¹³⁶ This parallel treatment leads me to conclude that for Julian, Mary is the preeminent seer. This role has two dimensions. On one level, Mary is an eye-witness to Jesus’ life and ministry. On another level, like Julian, Mary is astounded by the divine action she sees.¹³⁷ Astonishment precedes Mary’s birthing of the Word into the world.¹³⁸ Similarly, amazement precedes Julian’s proclamation of the visions. Moreover, Julian’s reference to the Annunciation would have had strong prophetic connotations for her listeners. The Annunciation was a symbol of visionary experience, and the stunned Virgin Mary served as a model for anyone who sought or received divine revelation.¹³⁹ The amazed Virgin was certainly a model for Julian.

Part III. Marian Proclamation

Julian’s attribution of both faith and prophetic voice to the Virgin Mary is set forth more vividly in the eleventh vision in which Mary is shown “high and noble and glorious and plesing”/ “high, noble and glorious, and more pleasing.”¹⁴⁰ The references here should not simply be read as a string of accolades, but as a direct reference to Mary’s assumption and coronation as regularly depicted in paintings and sculptures by

¹³⁵ Ibid. According to Watson and Jenkins, the concision of these references suggests they are a “stage on the way to contemplation of God.”

¹³⁶ Ibid., 72, 90.

¹³⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 137; Spearing, 46.

¹³⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 136.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 205; Spearing, 77.

the end of the twelfth century.¹⁴¹ Queen Mary was a woman of the word, or as Miri Rubin states it, “The Crowned Mary was an empowered Mary, one who possessed wisdom, prophecy, who read scripture and composed sacred texts . . . she was the author of the *Magnificat*, the writer of holy words.”¹⁴² Being a “woman of holy words” herself, it is little wonder that Julian has such a strong affinity for Mary. The two have more than an emphasis on extremity in common. They are also preachers.

Julian was one of the many medieval Christians who celebrated the Virgin Mary as a preacher. Mary was known for having an extreme love for Christ and the church, and the extremity of this love authorized her to preach. In this respect, the Virgin Mary was a preacher who relied on erotic authority and an invaluable model for Julian. In Mary, Julian would find a preacher who shared her extravagant view of the gospel. In Mary, Julian would also find one who integrated laughter and lament in her proclamation and did not shy away from deep feeling. In Mary, Julian found a preacher with a liberating vision of the preaching task. This vision had extravagant love, free expression, and union at its core. As a foundation for exploring Mary’s impact on Julian’s preaching, it is first helpful to note Mary’s influence as a preacher in the medieval church.

¹⁴¹ Watson and Jenkins, 204; Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 306.

¹⁴² Rubin, 308.

Mary's Reputation as a Preacher

Despite all the prohibitions against women preaching, no one in the medieval church proclaims the gospel more than the Virgin Mary. Her voice is heard in biblical commentary, sermons, monastic liturgies, and in myriad opportunities for devotion.¹⁴³

The Virgin's elevated stature within the church stands behind an eleventh-century prayer from the Beauvais region of Northern France:

When I think of angels
Of prophets and apostles,
Of victorious martyrs,
And of the most chaste of virgins,
No one seems more powerful,
No one more merciful,
With their consent I say,
Than the mother of God.¹⁴⁴

The image of Mary as prophet has a long history in Christianity and ought to receive more attention. Syriac Christians as early as the second century emphasized her "wakened ear" and saw it as the place she conceived.¹⁴⁵ Some Syriac writers also saw the Annunciation as a moment when the Most High "entered Mary rather than Mary's body itself."¹⁴⁶ Such readings suggest Mary is under the anointing like the prophet

¹⁴³ Rubin, 164.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 132, 451, note 46.

¹⁴⁵ "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught." Isaiah 50:4 NRSV; Rubin, 37. Rubin goes on to explain that Mary's faithful listening was contrasted with Eve's flawed listening.

¹⁴⁶ Rubin, 36, 434, note 13. Rubin draws on the work of Sebastian Brock. Sebastian Brock, "Passover, Annunciation and Epiclesis: Some Remarks on the Term *aggen* in the Syriac Versions of Lk 1:35" *Novum Testamentum* 24 (1982): 22-33.

Isaiah who declares, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me.”¹⁴⁷ Even as John the Baptist is first to preach, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” Mary’s *Magnificat* is the precursor to Jesus’ message about bringing good news to the poor.¹⁴⁸

In fourteenth-century York, the Virgin Mary is figured as a new Moses and named, “Rubus Moisi.”¹⁴⁹ She becomes “the voice of God, the object of revelation to Moses, and therefore, by implication, simultaneously the giver and bearer of the law, both the enlightener of the new and the connection to the old.”¹⁵⁰ Mary can be understood as “breaking the prophetic silence that characterized the centuries before the birth of Jesus.”¹⁵¹ According to medieval tradition, Mary labors with the apostles after Jesus’ assumption and continues his ministry of preaching and healing.¹⁵²

Mary also had a role as a proclaimer in medieval biblical commentary. Rupert of Deutz, a twelfth-century monk and scholar situated near Cologne, used Mary as the

¹⁴⁷ Isaiah 61:1 NRSV.

¹⁴⁸ Matthew 3:2, 4:17, Luke 1:46-55, 4:18 NRSV. Mongezi Guma, “The Magnificat: Mary Speaks on Justice,” in *Living the Magnificat: Affirming Catholicism in a Broken World*, edited by Mark D. Chapman (London: Mowbray, 2007), 52. James Wallace also sees Luke 1:46-55 as one that reveals her as a prophet who “joins with all those prophetic voices in Israel’s history which proclaimed Yahweh as the God who saves, who lifts up and does great things for the lowly, and who is the hope of the oppressed and the downtrodden.” He goes on to call her “Mary of Nazareth,” the “courageous herald of the power of God, faithful witness to the hope of fulfillment, and subversive agent opposing the unjust status quo of the rich and self-satisfied.” James Wallace, “Preaching on the Feasts of Mary,” in *Mother, Behold Your Son: Essays in Honor of Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm.* (Washington: The Carmelite Institute, 2001), 271-272.

¹⁴⁹ Adrienne Williams Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 112.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Guma pairs Mary with Elizabeth in this regard, describing them as “new prophetic voices.” He goes on to say, “The message of Mary and Elizabeth, therefore, is the prolegomenon of that new message of salvation. In a symbolic way the Magnificat is therefore the forerunner of Jesus’ ‘Programme of Action’ that is advertised by Luke: ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has chosen me to bring news to the poor’ (4.16-30). There is clearly an affinity between the magnificat and the Programme.” Guma 51-52.

¹⁵² Rubin, 152.

allegorical key in his commentary on the Song of Songs.¹⁵³ When the scripture says, “Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one,” Rupert hears a reference to Mary’s open mouth confirming the gospel.¹⁵⁴ In his commentary, Rupert presents Mary as a devout figure who brought Jews to conversion and proclaimed the good news.¹⁵⁵ His Marian emphasis is ultimately deemed too heavy-handed and he is required to rein in his portrayal.¹⁵⁶

Yet Rupert is not alone in his desire to hear the Virgin preach. Helinand of Froidmont, a thirteenth-century troubadour turned Cistercian monk, thought Mary’s voice ought to be heard from the pulpit. He used “every occasion” he could to present her model of faith and purity.¹⁵⁷ The depth of his attention to her was so great and his usage so common that she became more than a mere exemplar. Miri Rubin ultimately concludes that, “He made Mary into a preacher of sorts, one who lovingly imparted knowledge to her young, her dependents. Mary was remade as a preacher by the consummate Cistercian preacher- Helinand himself.”¹⁵⁸ Thus, in biblical commentary, devotional materials and sermons, the Virgin Mary had a compelling presence as a preacher of the gospel.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 159.

¹⁵⁴ Song of Songs 5:2 NRSV; Rubin, 160.

¹⁵⁵ Rubin, 160.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 161.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 155.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 157.

Mary's Reputation for Excess

The Virgin also had something of a reputation for excess. Her passion for God was noticeably intense and sometimes led her to transgress social boundaries. Her zeal for sharing the gospel creates particular challenges when she draws on laughter and lament. I will discuss both of these dimensions in turn.

Laughter: "Holy Folk Should Not Laugh"

In medieval England the Virgin was known by some to have a playful side and be something of a trickster.¹⁵⁹ She could respond to the prayers of her petitioners in amusing ways or even directly fill her petitioners with laughter.¹⁶⁰ This comic dimension to Mary is chronicled primarily in songs, tales and miracle stories but also shows up prominently in medieval plays. Among the more popular comedies of the time were narratives about Joseph confronting Mary about her pregnancy and responses of midwives to the Virgin birth.¹⁶¹ The latter, on "Doubting Salome," involves a midwife who needs tactile evidence of the Virgin birth much like the assurance "Doubting Thomas" seeks in John 20:25. This play was eventually banned for containing "sundry absurd & gross errors & heresies joined with profanation & great abuse of god's holy

¹⁵⁹ Boyarin, 90-91.

¹⁶⁰ Connie L. Scarborough, "Laughter and the Comedic in a Religious Text: The Example of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*," in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning and Consequences*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, GmbH & Co. KG, 2010), 281-294. It is difficult, however, to determine the parameters around the corpus of Virgin miracle stories in medieval England, and also difficult to confirm transmission patterns. Boyarin, 9.

¹⁶¹ Ingvild S. Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 99.

word.”¹⁶² Similarly, a 1421 play on the Virgin came to an end after Masons complained that it generated “laughter and shouting rather than devotion.”¹⁶³

For those entrenched in ecclesiastical norms of authority, the notion of the Virgin laughing or causing others to laugh was incompatible with her role as preacher. Medieval culture was characterized by rigid behavioral codes and vigorously policed boundaries. Laughter threatens to destabilize these codes and could be met with direct censure. For instance, in a revealing exchange with one of the archbishop’s stewards, Margery Kempe chuckles aloud. He immediately challenges her piety, “Holy folke schulde not lawghe.”¹⁶⁴ The steward could draw on a long line of historical support for this view. Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Basil, and Pseudo-Cyprian all frowned on laughter.¹⁶⁵ Their strong resistance to laughter served to increase its symbolic power.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 78-79. Additional tensions in the Salome story are relayed in Pieter W. Van der Horst’s “Sex, Birth, Purity and Asceticism in the *Protevangelium Jacobi*” and George Themelis Zervos’ “Christmas with Salome” in *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 56-66 and 77-98, respectively.

¹⁶³ Waller, 68.

¹⁶⁴ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 267.

¹⁶⁵ Gilhus, 62. John Chrysostom and Jerome even voice concerns about smiling. Olga V. Trokhimenko, “Women’s Laughter and Gender Politics in Medieval Conduct Discourse,” in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning and Consequences*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, GmbH & Co. KG, 2010), 254. In describing the beauty of the virginal soul, Chrysostom says, “She cuts away the decoration from her clothes and continually exhorts her countenance not to dissolve into laughter, not to even smile quietly, but always to exhibit a serious and austere visage, one prepared always for tears, never for laughter.” John Chrysostom, *On Virginity. Against Remarriage*, trans. Sally Rieger Shore with an Introduction by Elizabeth A. Clark, *Studies in Women and Religion*, Vol. 9 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press), 100.

¹⁶⁶ Trokhimenko explains that the perspectives of the Church Fathers are represented in homiletical and theological writings as well as conduct literature during the high and late medieval period. Trokhimenko, 254-255.

John Chrysostom is among the preachers who grilled mandatory seriousness into his listeners, saying, “Tell me, dost thou laugh? Where dost thou hear of Christ doing this? Nowhere; but that He was sad indeed oftentimes.”¹⁶⁷ In another sermon Chrysostom associates laughter with an ominous future:

When therefore thou seest persons laughing, reflect that those teeth, that grin now, will one day have to sustain that most dreadful wailing and gnashing, and that they will remember this same laugh on That Day whilst they are grinding and gnashing! Then thou too shalt remember this laugh!¹⁶⁸

Chrysostom does not resist laughter in all circumstances, just the “excess” or uncontrolled laughter that was perceived as a challenge to Christian asceticism.¹⁶⁹ The devout person was supposed to focus on Jesus’ suffering and death, and following the examples of Desert Fathers like Saint John the Dwarf and Saint Anthony of Egypt, refrain from laughing.¹⁷⁰ Medieval English religious culture incorporated this suspicion toward laughter.¹⁷¹ A solemn disposition was expected of anyone who sought even a small measure of ecclesiastical authority.¹⁷²

In this context, women’s laughter presented a particular challenge to norms of piety because laughter and lust were coupled together.¹⁷³ As a result, medieval conduct literature cautions women to restrain their laughter, “Laughe thou not to loude, ne yane

¹⁶⁷ Lochrie, 139.

¹⁶⁸ Gilhus, 63. Gilhus draws on Chrysostom’s *Concerning the Statues, Homily, XX*. Chrysostom may be influenced by an association between laughter and gnashing teeth in Psalm 37:12-13. Gilhus, 25.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 62.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷¹ Lochrie, 139.

¹⁷² Lochrie, 143-146. Lochrie notes an example in which a monk’s desire for authority prevents him from laughing.

¹⁷³ The open mouth was linked to the vagina. Trokhimenko, 262.

thou no to wide/but laughe thou softe and myelde.”¹⁷⁴ As a matter of etiquette and a sign of morality, medieval women were called to police their countenances and maintain a demeanor that was pleasant but not too gleeful and certainly not wanton enough to laugh out loud.¹⁷⁵ Accordingly, *Ancrene Wisse* counsels the anchoress to avoid the model of “the cackling Eve” and follow the Virgin’s example.¹⁷⁶ Here, the Virgin’s example is one of utter seriousness and restraint. There is no room for the notion that the Virgin could be at ease with laughter and she is certainly not imagined as one who would provoke it.

Most anchoresses would have been inclined to simply accept this strict guidance from *Ancrene Wisse*. Of course, Julian is not most anchoresses. This fact is especially clear when she talks about being filled with joy and bursting into laughter in the midst of her ecstatic experience, “For this sight, I laught mightily, and that made them to laugh that were about me, and ther laughing was a liking to me”/ “At this revelation I laughed heartily and that made those who were around me laugh too, and their laughter pleased me.”¹⁷⁷ Apparently, there is nothing demure about this chuckle

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 251.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 249. Reflecting on Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s thirteenth-century *Frauenbuch*, Trokhimenko goes on to explain why a pleasant demeanor was required, “Women’s refusal to display contentment, whether sincerely felt or merely performed, proves to be destructive: it is interpreted as a sign of animosity, discontent, and social discord that impacts men’s own state of high-mindedness and consequently sends the world into a downward spiral.”

¹⁷⁶ *Ancrene Wisse* warns that “the devil-crow carries off and swallows all the good which cackling anchoresses have given birth to, which should bear them up like birds toward heaven if it had not been cackled away.” *Ancrene Wisse*, 73.

¹⁷⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 171; Spearing, 61.

because everyone in the room laughs with Julian, and she goes on to say she wishes that her fellow Christians were with her because they would have laughed heartily as well.¹⁷⁸

The image that tickles Julian is one in which Jesus scorns the fiend.¹⁷⁹ This is a moment that one might assume would be terrifying. Her response is a surprising mismatch to such assumptions, just as her jovial tone would ordinarily seem to be a mismatch for reflecting on the Passion. Julian's "irreverent expression of mirth" indicates the extremity of her experience and the notion that she will not contain herself.¹⁸⁰

I read Julian's laughter here as akin to that shared between lovers—a laughter rooted in security and intimacy. This is the kind of "mature merriment" Richard Rolle urges God's lover to take in *The Fire of Love*.¹⁸¹ This laughter emerges from the one who delights in God and whose soul is sweetened by God's burning love.¹⁸² In this love, an excess prevails and peals of laughter erupt in unlikely moments. Take, for instance, Elizabeth of Hungary, a thirteenth-century holy woman who was shown Christ's face in

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 169-171; Spearing, 61.

¹⁸⁰ Lochrie, 147.

¹⁸¹ Lochrie, 140. Love can, according to Rolle, fill the heart with laughter and rejoicing. It is important to note that Rolle distinguishes between different kinds of laughter and frowns on laughter that is vain. Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love and The Mending of Life*, trans. and with an Introduction by M. L. del Mastro (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1981), 181.

¹⁸² Lochrie, 140. Lochrie suggests the beloved, in this case Margery Kempe, seeks to share laughter with the world despite the promise of scorn. Jesus tells Margery, "You shall be eaten and gnawed by the people of the world as the cod is gnawed by rats." Ibid., 158.

an ecstatic vision and upon seeing it burst into laughter. “I thought I could no better express it then with laughing,” she explains.¹⁸³

Even as Julian’s laughter points to a bond with Jesus, it opens the way for her fellow Christians to join in.¹⁸⁴ One could say the holiness in her laughter is tied to its potential to open a space for God. As Karma Lochrie explains, “Laughter is that excess which destabilizes the mystic self and text, permitting a passageway through which mystic and reader may approach God.”¹⁸⁵ In Julian’s case, the passageway leads into the joy of the resurrection.¹⁸⁶ The depth of this joy is enough for Julian to shake up conventional models of women’s piety and disclose a form of authority where there is room for unconstrained joy.¹⁸⁷ By laughing and inviting others to join her, Julian is piercing a veil of propriety and drawing her audience into the extravagant delight of the gospel.¹⁸⁸

Given the church’s anxiety about laughter, Julian has few models of Christian proclamation that invite listeners to laugh. There are even fewer models that

¹⁸³ Lochrie, 147.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 148.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Julian’s merry spirit should not be read as thin triumphalism. As Denys Turner states, “Notably, there is no concluding Resurrection narrative in Julian, no further episode of denouement, no upbeat reversal of the fortunes of the Cross. That is not the Gospel. That is Hollywood’s role for the Marine Corps, an entirely secular form of optimism, and a merely Pelagian story that tells of the hope that may be placed in superior force.” Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 20-21.

¹⁸⁷ Lochrie, 143. There are some significant differences between Julian’s laughter and Margery Kempe’s laughter. Yet, I would argue that Lochrie could speak of both women’s laughter as “a hermeneutic designed to upset our conventions of reading, or expectations of authority, and our models of piety.” I would not go so far as to say Julian engages in “a radical practice of charity through laughter,” though I agree Margery certainly does. Lochrie, 146.

¹⁸⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 171; Spearing, 61. She does, however, provide an explanation, “I understode that we may laugh in comforting of oureselfe and joyeng in God for the feend is overcome.”

underscore the extreme delight of the gospel while pressing on taboos. The closest examples might be drawn from medieval religious comedies about the Virgin Mary, though, as noted above, these plays are readily censored. I do not intend to portray Julian as a subversive by pointing to the possibility that she was influenced by these comedies. However, I would describe her decision to openly discuss and defend her laughter as audacious. Further, this decision is consistent with the Virgin's model of transgressing social boundaries in an effort to proclaim the gospel. Nowhere is this tendency to transgress rules of propriety more apparent than in medieval portrayals of the Virgin at the cross.¹⁸⁹

Lament: Woman of Sorrows

Due to the influence of medieval drama and art, it would have been difficult for Julian to imagine the scene at Calvary without also remembering the Virgin's anguish. In these artistic depictions with which she would have been familiar, like the Digby play on Christ's burial, Jesus' crucified body occupies the central visual, but the Virgin provides the main audio.¹⁹⁰ Her screams articulate, as words cannot, a sorrow that puts her on the edge of sanity. These screams pronounce a "word" of judgment against the powers and principalities. Even Jesus' "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" is stoic in comparison to the shrieking Virgin.¹⁹¹ Images of the *mater dolorosa*, whether doubled over with tears, fainting, swooning or having to be held up by others were common in late medieval

¹⁸⁹ Rubin, 106, 447, note 24. Mary's association with the cross is so strong that in one medieval song the cross (personified) compares itself to Mary.

¹⁹⁰ Lochrie, 191.

¹⁹¹ Matthew 27:46 NRSV. Lochrie notes the contrast between Christ's silent body and the howling Virgin in Niccolo dell'Arca's fifteenth century pieta. Lochrie, 187, 189-190.

Europe.¹⁹² The Virgin's impassioned response to the crucifixion is a climactic moment of proclamation, a moment when she declares Christ to be Lord through her lament.

Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, ca. 1435, conveys the popular belief that the "Virgin bore in her heart the wounds that Christ suffered during his crucifixion."¹⁹³ Van der Weyden's Mary has fainted right next to Jesus and the curves of her torso and legs parallel the curves of Jesus' torso and legs.¹⁹⁴ The fatigued arms of both mother and son collapse in the same position.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Rubin and Lochrie offer representative examples. Rubin, 314-315; Lochrie, 180-181. Mary might also be shown tugging at Jesus' body. Rubin, 244.

¹⁹³ Judith Dupré, *Full of Grace: Encountering Mary in Faith, Art, and Life* (New York: Random House, 2010), 212. This idea stems in part from Simeon's prophecy to Mary that "a sword will pierce your own soul too." Luke 2:35 NRSV. Lochrie, 178.

¹⁹⁴ Dupré, 212-213.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.



Figure 5. Weyden Rogier (Roger) van der (c. 1399-1464). Descent from the Cross. Ca. 1435. Oil on panel. 2.2 x 2.62 m. Museo del Prado. Copyright of the image Museo Nacional del Prado/Art Resource, NY.

The Virgin's suffering was so charged with meaning that some devotees wanted to hold a feast to remember the *spasimo* (swooning).¹⁹⁶ Ultimately the Vatican objected to this demonstrative image of the Virgin, finding that it would have been more suitable for Mary to exercise self-control during a moment as holy as the crucifixion.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Rubin, 362.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. Thomas de Vio, assigned by Pope Julius II to explore the appropriateness of the feast, also objected on the grounds that the swooning was not specified in scripture.

Pressure to censor or silence the Virgin existed in ecclesiastical channels as well as in art. In one Gospel Play, John and the Magdalene struggle with the Virgin's repeated fainting and wailing, and eventually try to silence her.¹⁹⁸ John asks her to focus on the resurrection, but her lamentation continues.¹⁹⁹ The audience must sit with the inexpressibility of her pain.²⁰⁰

In still another medium, monastic chant, Mary addresses those participating in worship by saying, "You who love the Creator, now listen to my pain."²⁰¹ Christ responds by saying his mother's pain cuts him "like a knife."²⁰² Clearly, Mary is deemed to have a voice at the crucifixion that is strong enough to stir piety in those who will listen. Yet, to listen to Mary is to be unsettled.

The *mater dolorosa* has a strong influence on Margery Kempe, one of Julian's acquaintances. Margery hears the Virgin's cries as proclamation. She believes the Virgin's tears expose the hard-heartedness of the world and lead to Christ's adoration. The Virgin's message is one of excessive love. While the content of the Virgin's wailing is ultimately inexpressible, Margery Kempe still uses her as a model of proclamation.²⁰³ Kempe promises to take up the Virgin's sorrow and share it with the world.²⁰⁴ As a result, Margery bursts into high-pitched screams whenever she is reminded of the

¹⁹⁸ Lochrie, 183.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Rubin, 254.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Lochrie, 177.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

Passion and becomes a spectacle. This peculiar call to proclaim through weeping is confirmed by Jesus:

[S]ometimes I give you great cries and roarings in order to make the people afraid for the grace that I put in you as a token that I wish that my mother's sorrow be known through you, so that men and women might have the more compassion of her sorrow which she suffered for me.²⁰⁵

Sometimes Margery makes the Virgin's sorrow known in church during sermons.

As one would expect, her piercing screams are an unwelcome and disruptive message that prompts considerable resistance. On this note, Karma Lochrie says, "It is significant that the Grey Friar who banishes Kempe from his church does so not because he opposes her weeping but because he opposes her weeping in his church during his sermons."²⁰⁶ Initially Margery is equally distressed by her tears during sermons, praying, "take these cryings from me during sermons so that I do not cry at your holy preaching and let me have them by myself alone so that I am not barred from hearing your holy preaching and your holy words, for I cannot suffer any greater pain in this world than to be barred from hearing your holy word."²⁰⁷ As her consciousness evolves, however, Margery comes to accept her role and see herself as a parable of sorts, or in Christ's words to her, "a mirror."²⁰⁸ The Virgin's counsel is particularly consoling for Margery:

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 193; Lochrie explains that those who read Kempe's tears also read the Virgins tears and the crucified body of Jesus which stirs the tears.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 196. Lochrie notes that Margery lives in a context in which tears are actually encouraged and serve as a mark of piety as long as they are shed privately. It is the public nature of Margery's tears, the breaching of the public-private boundary that is so disturbing.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 197.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

And therefore, my dear daughter, do not be ashamed of him who is your God, your Lord, and your love, any more than I was when I saw him hang on the Cross, my sweet Son, Jesus, to cry and weep for the pain of my sweet Son, Jesus Christ; nor was Mary Magdalene ashamed to cry and weep for my Son's love. And therefore, daughter, if you wish to be a partaker in our joy, you must be a partaker in our sorrow.²⁰⁹

With such encouragement, Margery finds the strength to persevere in the face of resistance and her outbursts eventually earn her a reputation. She travels from town to town with something of a weeping itinerancy. Her tears garner scorn and threats at virtually every stop along the way but she will not be silenced. Her zeal is as intense as her sobbing.

The Virgin's encouragement was effective for another reason. In medieval England, the Virgin was understood to be the supreme witness to the crucifixion, having both cognitive and affective knowledge of the crucifixion. In other words, she was a witness to historical events as well as to the impact of the Passion on the human soul. Her motherly sufferings gave her a privileged reading of the Passion so that, for many in the medieval church, the crucifixion was seen through her eyes.²¹⁰ Accordingly, Margery's confidence in her proclamation grows as she finds herself reading Christ's body like the Virgin did.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 192.

²¹⁰ Rubin, 109, 244; Lochrie, 191. Lochrie notes that Mary Magdalene is often thought to have a privileged reading as well.

Julian Follows Mary's Approach

While Julian's preaching does not speak in howls and screams like Margery's, it does reflect a Marian influence in the realm of authority.²¹¹ Julian seems to follow Mary's lead in three important areas. First, like Mary, Julian relies on the authorizing power of extravagant love. Second, Julian follows Mary's example of resisting censorship. Third, Julian prioritizes the unitive aspects of divine power just as Mary did.

Extravagant Love

Like the Virgin, Julian's preaching is energized and authorized by an experience of extravagant love. Julian introduces this extravagance quite early in both her works. Upon seeing the vision of the thorn piercing Christ's brow she says, "This shewing was quick and lively, and hidous and dredfulle, and swete and lovely" / "This showing was alive and vivid, horrifying and awe-inspiring, sweet and lovely."²¹² Here, the extravagance of her encounter with God stands out. It is clear that language only clumsily expresses the depth of what she wants to say but the magnitude of her experience demands the attempt.²¹³

Further, Julian seeks to draw others into this extravagance. Preaching is Julian's means of ushering others into the magnitude of God's love. In a (deutero) Pauline way,

²¹¹ Julian also elevates Mary's fellow suffering at the crucifixion. Watson and Jenkins, 85; Spearing, 16.

²¹² Watson and Jenkins, 147; Spearing, 51. Watson and Jenkins offer "frightening" as a synonym for "dredfulle," Watson and Jenkins, 146.

²¹³ She continually revisits the visions, nurses her interpretations, and relates them to the church. Bauerschmidt says, "the visions were simply her initiation into a life of seeking and thus of unending 'showings,' a life in which others could participate as readily as she." Frederick Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 46.

Julian prays that her listeners “may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”²¹⁴ She wants to be sure her audience is “filled with all the fullness of God.” Magnitude is central here.

Julian sees the magnitude of Mary’s pain as instructive. As Julian recounts the vision of Christ’s pain she describes herself as so “fulle of paines” that she wonders “Is ony paine in helle lik this?”/ “Is any pain like this?” and “How might ony paine be more then to see him that is alle my life, alle my blisse, and alle my joy suffer?”/ “How could any pain be greater to me than to see him who is my whole life, all my bliss and all my joy, suffering?”²¹⁵ The depth of this experience leads Julian to appropriate a Marian frame for it. In anguish, Julian turns to Mary. She notes how the deep love between mother and son caused the “mekillehede,” that is, the magnitude, of Mary’s suffering.²¹⁶ Julian goes on to say, “For so mekille as she loved him more then alle other, her paine passed alle other. For ever the higher, the mightier, the swetter that the love is, the more sorow it is to the lover to se that body in paine that he loved”/ “[F]or just as her love for him surpassed that of anyone else, so did her suffering for him; for the higher, the stronger, the dearer that love is, the greater the sorrow that the lover feels to see the beloved body in pain.”²¹⁷ Moreover, Julian makes it clear that Mary suffers because

²¹⁴ Ephesians 3:18 NRSV.

²¹⁵ Watson and Jenkins, 183; Spearing, 67. Julian also notes that she is tapping into the cosmic sorrow that is made apparent in the cross, saying, “the firmamente and erth, failed for sorow in ther kind in the time of Cristes dying”/ “At the time of Christ’s dying, the firmament and the earth failed for sorrow.” Watson and Jenkins, 185; Spearing, 68.

²¹⁶ Watson and Jenkins, 185.

²¹⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 185; Spearing, 67.

she has an abundance of “kinde love” for Jesus—the form of love that is shared between lovers and close relatives.²¹⁸ Julian places herself among “alle his tru lovers” who are filled with this “kinde love.”²¹⁹ In other words, Julian elevates the love Mary demonstrates at the crucifixion and assumes a comparable stance herself.

Resisting Censorship

Secondly, Julian follows in the Virgin’s footsteps as she resists censorship. In the medieval depictions noted above, the Virgin is determined to proclaim her love and her loss despite the objections of those around her. She is quite willing to make a scene in voicing her truth. Open-mouthed wailing of a sort that is out of line with medieval English comportment, swooning, and fainting—these are all brought to bear in the Virgin’s proclamation. Her insistence on being heard in full pays off in the devotion she inspires to Christ. One could even say her authority actually increases as she resists those who attempt to silence her. In this respect the Virgin’s situation is comparable to that of Reverend Billy, who I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In both cases attempts to silence a message ultimately amplify it and enlarge the preacher’s voice.

Though the particulars of Julian’s case differ from those of both the Virgin and Reverend Billy, Julian demonstrates sensitivity to the dynamics of silencing and censoring. In fact, Julian is a veritable master at negotiating censorship. Sometimes she addresses the issue head on, “Botte for I am a woman shulde I therfore leve that I shulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I sawe in that same time that it

²¹⁸ Watson and Jenkins, 184.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 185.

is his wille that it be knawen?"/Just because I am a woman must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time both his goodness and his wish that it should be shown?"²²⁰ Other times Julian demonstrates this sensitivity through her strategic placement of material. For example, she makes a wedge for her statement about sin as "befitting" by first declaring her submission to Holy Church.²²¹

She also knows when to flout or defy boundaries altogether. For instance, she discusses content that is outside the scope of that which is permissible for a layperson writing in the vernacular. She also boldly recounts a moment when she laughs out loud. She knows when to align herself with wrongfully censored figures from the church's past like Saint Cecelia, John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul.²²² And she even knows when to take the voice of a lover in order to gain more license to speak. Together, these strategies suggest more than rhetorical skill; they amount to a rhetorical posture. This posture is a Marian one.

Oneing

I sense that the commitment to uncensored proclamation is tied to another core aspect of authority, something Julian calls "oneing."²²³ Oneing is that process by which

²²⁰ Watson and Jenkins, 75; Spearing, 11.

²²¹ Watson and Jenkins, 91; Spearing, 21.

²²² I discussed these associations in Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation.

²²³ Watson and Jenkins, 255; Spearing, 103. Spearing translates the verb "to one" as "to unite."

the soul cleaves to God and achieves a synergy with the divine will.²²⁴ The mutual love between God and the soul flares up, and, in keeping with the erotic resonances, the two become one, fulfilling part of God's plan for creation.²²⁵ I should stress that oneing is a communal endeavor. Oneing fosters recognition of the deep unity among members of the body of Christ and a corresponding connection to all creatures.²²⁶

Through prayer the soul is oned to God and becomes a partner in God's loving action in the world.²²⁷ No longer is the soul cold or indifferent to God's action; no longer is the soul unaware of her worth to God. Instead, the soul rises up and delights in her likeness to God in nature and substance.²²⁸ All worldly vestiges of power and rank recede into the background and the union between God and the soul yields a strong sense of authority and dignity. Julian invites her listeners to bask in this oneness. In doing so, she is also inviting them to embrace the authority that comes from being a beloved child of God and a partner in divine work. Here, Julian is inviting her listeners to wade in the same stream in which she has found her own sense of value and voice. She also shares the model she has found for walking in this kind of authority. That model is the Virgin Mary.

²²⁴ I agree with C. Hugh Hildesley who compares oneing to having "that mind in you which is also in Christ Jesus." C. Hugh Hildesley, *Journeying with Julian* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1993), 132.

²²⁵ Hildesley discusses the role of creation. Hildesley, 131. As suggested by the words "flares up," this union does not suggest that the soul is absorbed into the Trinity. A distinction between God and the soul is maintained.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Watson and Jenkins, 255; Spearing, 103.

²²⁸ Julian explains that the soul is like God in nature and substance but frequently unlike God in condition due to sin. Watson and Jenkins, 255; Spearing, 103. Hildesley, 131.

Julian describes Mary as “oned” to God and alludes to a special status that distinguishes Mary from other human beings on the basis of her biological and emotional relationship to Christ.²²⁹ Yet, she is also pointing to a vein of Marian authority. Indeed, Mary’s extravagant witness of love flows from being oned to God and being a willing collaborator in the divine will. The “simpille maidene” with an extraordinary desire to please God and stir faith becomes Mother of the Church, Mother of the Word, and “Lady Rhetorica.”²³⁰ Moreover, Mary embodies the goal of Christian proclamation: the oneing of souls.

In all of her complexity, the medieval English Mary provides a striking model of authority that draws on extravagant love, willingness to resist censorship, and union with God. These attributes reveal her as not merely holy in the buttoned-up sense of the word but also quite daring. It is easy to see why Mary inspires someone like Julian who seeks to draw others into an extreme experience of grace.

Conclusion

During the 1980s, a dictatorship in Guatemala made it illegal to publicly read the *Magnificat*.²³¹ Mary’s prophecy about a God who lifts up the lowly and sends the rich away empty was a threat to the establishment. Apparently, the regime was in touch

²²⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 185; Spearing, 67.

²³⁰ Julian emphasizes Mary’s simplicity and seems to marvel in the power that is embodied in her tiny frame. Julian refers to Mary as “a simplille maidene . . . meeke, yonge of age” and as “a simpille creature of his making,” Watson and Jenkins, 69, 71. Georgiana Donavin discusses Mary’s title of “Lady Rhetorica” and her role as “exemplar of perfected speech in a fallen world.” Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 2012), 3.

²³¹ Mark D. Chapman, ed., *Living the Magnificat: Affirming Catholicism in a Broken World* (London and New York: Mowbray, 2007), xii.

with Mary's ability to proclaim God's transformative action in the world and inspire others to follow her lead. While some contemporary Christians might find such censorship puzzling and extreme, few in the medieval English church would need an explanation. The Virgin embodied an unique mode of authority energized by love, and grasping the basis of Mary's authority is essential to understanding her as a preacher.

The same could be said of Julian. Julian's message of love is strengthened by a rather bold understanding of authority for preaching. In this chapter I argued that Julian preaches to articulate an extravagant experience of love and draw others into its confounding power. Her understanding of the gospel as an extreme message of love feeds her archetype of the preacher as lover and justifies her reliance on erotic authority. Rather than being bound by cultural norms of respectability, she is bound by her commitment to see souls "oned" to God. In this respect Julian's authority mirrors the Virgin's.

Julian is bold enough to believe love might authorize preaching and also serve as the chief end of Christian proclamation. How might such an understanding of preaching fare in a contemporary North American context? What kind of legacy is established by Julian's approach? I turn to these questions in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five

In the Shadow of the Pulpit

Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence.

-Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Introduction

My reflection on new directions for homiletics in light of Julian's life and work led me to a special pew near the piano at Trinity Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. That pew was for many years the place where members of the congregation could find Mrs. Ann Roberts. Until her death in 2011, Mrs. Roberts was our "church mother," a figure found in virtually all Black churches regardless of denominational affiliation.¹

To first-time visitors or newcomers the church mother may appear to be nothing more than another elderly woman in the congregation. But as one becomes more grounded in the congregation's life, her influence becomes increasingly clear.² Church mothers are the contemporary anchors of the Black Church.³ Like the medieval anchoress, the church mother is metaphorically "anchored under a church like an anchor under the side of a ship, to hold that ship so that waves and storms do not overturn it."⁴ Over the centuries, the church mother has embodied spiritual depth and

¹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya describe the church mother's title as honorific and note that the role has no parallel in white churches because it evolves out of African-American kinship networks. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 275. Anthea Butler offers helpful insight on church mothers in *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) and so does Daphne C. Wiggins in *Righteous Content: Black Women's Perspectives on Church and Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). Cheryl Townsend Gilkes provides thick descriptions of the church mother's authority in *"If It Wasn't for the Women:" Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

² The fact that a church mother's influence may not be discernible by a visitor points to a complex relationship between spiritual and temporal power. In the Church of God in Christ, women were denied the power of ordination but given some control over the ordained. Butler, 6.

³ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explains that church mothers serve for long periods of time and accumulate considerable authority as "role models, power brokers, and venerable elders." Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Roles of Church and Community Mothers: Ambivalent American Sexism or Fragmented African Familyhood?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 1 (1986): 44.

⁴ *Ancrene Wisse's* description of the role is worth noting in full, "The bird of night under the eaves symbolizes recluses, who dwell under the eaves of a church because they understand that they should be

served the faith community through her intercessions and exhortations. Her unique ministry of proclamation grows out of a complex web of African-American history, spirituality, and ecclesiology but also reflects some of the key aspects of anchoritic theology. I see the church mother as Julian's progeny. By this term I do not mean to suggest the church mother flatly imitates Julian but rather that she progresses key facets of Julian's legacy of preaching. In other words, Julian and the church mother are allied in their approach to preaching.

In this chapter I will provide a snapshot of the church mother's vocation of preaching and use it to tease out some of the contemporary homiletical implications of anchoritic preaching. I will begin with background on the church mother's role and note its multiple historical streams. After laying this historical foundation, I consider the forms her preaching can take and specific places it may arise. Then, I discuss correlations with Julian's preaching, giving special attention to the influences of embodied weakness, risk, and marginality. I conclude that both Julian and the church mother challenge long held assumptions about what it means to preach and offer a compelling revision of the task. Overall, I hope to make a case for Julian's continuing

of so holy a life that the whole of Holy Church, that is, Christian people, can lean upon them and trust them, while they hold her up with their holiness of life and their blessed prayers. This is why an anchoress is called an anchoress, and is anchored under a church like an anchor under the side of a ship, to hold that ship so that waves and storms do not overturn it. In the same way all Holy Church, which is called a ship, must anchor on the anchoress, in order that she may so hold it that the devil's blasts, which are temptations, do not overturn it. Every anchoress has made this agreement, both through the title of anchoress and the fact that she dwells under the church, to shore her up if she shows signs of falling. If she breaks the agreement, see to whom she lies, and how continuously: for she never stirs; an anchorhouse and her name always affirm this agreement, even when she sleeps." *Ancrene Wisse*, 101.

relevance as a preacher, particularly for individuals who have a marginal status in relation to the pulpit.

What is a Church Mother?

Anthea Butler captures the church mother's centrality to congregational life when she says the role "is as much of a fixture as the role of preacher."⁵ While a history of patriarchal leadership has in some ways shrouded the prominence of her vocation, the church mother's influence is unquestionable. Few figures have a more direct impact on the spiritual lives or aspirations of parishioners in the Black Church.⁶ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explains the role precisely:

The Mother, while not the pastoral head, is the protocol leader for the congregation. . . She may or may not be a voting member of the church board, but in either case her opinion is always consulted, and usually heeded. . . . The Church Mother is the epitome of spirituality, providing a model for the women of the church. Whether she is scripturally knowledgeable, a prayer warrior, or a spiritual advisor, she has a "word from the Lord" that is never to be taken lightly. She may speak in little sermonettes to the congregation. She is never ignored.⁷

⁵ Butler, 2.

⁶ Clarence Hardy credits church mothers for shaping the "ordinary religious lives and dreams of black people in the United States." He argues that the church mother is a key player in black religious culture, representing, initiating and participating in major changes that encompass the sects on the margins and black Protestantism in the center. Clarence E. Hardy, III, "Fauset's (Missing) Pentecostals: Church Mothers, Remaking Respectability, and Religious Modernism," in *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions*, ed. Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 18.

⁷ Butler, 44, citing Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. Butler also asserts that "Church mothers are the women who recall the history of their churches, who chastise the pastor when he has interpreted scripture incorrectly, and who set the cultural and behavioral patterns for their congregations." Butler, 2.

The church mother may offer a brief word from the pulpit or lectern in the context of a formal worship service but this is the exception rather than the rule. Honing in on those moments obscures the broader scope of her influence. The core of her proclamation is mediated in words of grace whispered in a long hug, in a tune hummed in the hallway that “happens” to be overheard by just the right person, or in a story told in the parking lot about God’s deliverance and provision. If she uses a pulpit to address the congregation, rarely does this usage modify the content, tone or duration of the message she speaks. For the church mother, the pulpit offers convenience rather than elevation. In a sense, she is always behind a pulpit, only in her case that pulpit looks more like a cane, a patent leather handbag, the armrest of a wheelchair, or the shoulders of a small child. Behind these mobile pulpits she preaches the gospel. And, grasping the power of the church mother’s words is essential to understanding the preaching in the congregation overall. Sometimes the pastor “amplifies the teachings and doctrines that the church mothers have already imparted.”⁸

History

The history behind the contemporary church mother role is rather hazy, and research is fairly scarce. Anthea Butler, who has studied church mothers in the Church of God in Christ, has suggested that the vocation may have evolved out of fictive kinship

⁸ Ibid., 49. Butler goes on to say the pastor “exhorts, amplifies the teachings and doctrines that the church mothers have already imparted, and legitimizes these teachings and doctrines by means of his personal authority.” The power dynamics are clearly complex here. The church seeks to instantiate a patriarchal order while affirming the church mother’s proclamation at the same time.

relationships within the African-American community.⁹ Matriarchal family patterns or spiritual mothers in other religious traditions may have also been contributing factors.¹⁰

It is also possible to find an antecedent for the church mother in the antebellum slave preacher. The church mother's penchant for offering her unlicensed message outside the confines of a formal worship service is in some ways reminiscent of the slave preacher whose preaching ministry was often clandestine.¹¹ Proclamation of the word was certainly not limited to a public liturgical setting, and might take place whenever time and circumstance created a good opportunity. In this sense, slave religion was both "institutional and noninstitutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted."¹²

Antebellum slave religion may also have contributed to the church mother's role at another level. The church mother's role is characterized by the freedom to voice an alternative or dissident view. Slave communities can be credited with shaping a sermon space that was forged in dissent from the form of Christianity practiced by

⁹ Ibid., 2. Anthea Butler concurs and states, "The church mother is a repository of both belief and culture within her religious communities. Although the antecedents of church mothers are unclear, their presence in black churches is linked to spiritual mothers within other religious traditions, to matriarchal leadership, and to fictive family relations. Within COGIC, church mothers are links to the past as well as a very present part of the church in the twentieth century."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Raboteau argues that "slaves made Christianity truly their own" in secluded brush arbors or in secrecy in slave quarters. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978; 2004), 212. Participation in these secret services came with tremendous risk. Raboteau, 214-215; Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 29. Secrecy was also manifested in racially mixed settings. Part of the slave preacher's task in these settings was to craft a coded message that would sound compliant to masters but defiant and liberating to slaves. Raboteau, 232-233. While secret worship played a significant role in the religious lives of slaves, it is also important to note the existence of thriving antebellum black churches that functioned publicly. Raboteau, 196-210.

¹² Ibid., 212.

white elites.¹³ Historically, crusading women have played a prominent role in articulating that dissent and enlarging the community's vision of justice. As one example, Ida B. Wells-Barnett named and exposed the hypocrisy of white Christians during Reconstruction, and chastised black pastors for their timidity in the face of rampant violence and inequality.¹⁴ Other church women openly challenged the gradualism and cowardice they heard from the pulpit.¹⁵ Unequal power dynamics within the church could similarly be challenged. Ella Baker, for instance, never accepted Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assertion that "Leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but . . . descends from the pulpit to the pew" and instead she insisted that "Strong people don't need strong leaders."¹⁶ The critiques of activists like Wells-Barnett and Baker are consistent with the posture taken by the church mother, who, according to Anthea Butler, would similarly "chastise the pastor" for incorrectly interpreting

¹³ Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 26-27. Insurrectionists like Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner helped solidify this character. Raboteau, 163-164.

¹⁴ Patricia Ann Schecter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 64-65. Linda O. McMurray, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 160, 193.

¹⁵ These women engaged in a form of "talking back" that asserted full participation in the faith community. bell hooks asserts that talking back and voicing dissent are essential for oppressed and exploited people who seek healing and subjectivity. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 9.

¹⁶ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 188, 193. Baker also responded to the male chauvinism within the Civil Rights Movement with tongue in cheek remarks like "I live to serve." Ransby, 184. Baker's criticism of King and other male leaders in the Civil Rights Movement was well known. She saw danger in the Movement's dependence on charismatic male leadership. Some of the fundamental tensions that concern Baker are examined in Erica R. Edwards' *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

scripture and guide congregational culture.¹⁷ Ensuring quality control is part of the church mother's vocation.

One cannot rule out the historical influence of black female itinerants from the nineteenth century. The legacies of women like Sophie Murray, Elizabeth Cole, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Berry Smith, and Julia Foote extend to all women who preach, not merely to women who ultimately seek ordination.¹⁸ Lee, Elaw, Smith and Foote have been imagined as a unique quartet in the history of African-American women's preaching but it is reasonable to assume there were other African-American female preachers for whom there is no paper trail.¹⁹ Clarence Hardy's discussion of this issue is notable:

Shortly after Emancipation, black Baptist observers in the North believed that the power some black women exercised within rural religious communities in the South was an unfortunate heritage from the days of bondage and undoubtedly among the 'vices and irregularities inseparably attendant upon the state of slavery.' Though these 'church mothers' or 'gospel mothers' were, according to black missionary Charles Satchel in the late 1860s, 'outside of the New Testament arrangement,' these women nevertheless claimed 'to be under the special

¹⁷ Butler, 2. Cheryl Gilkes also notes the importance of church mothers in communal activism. Gilkes, "Roles of Church and Community Mothers," 49-50.

¹⁸ Sophie Murray and Elizabeth Cole are eighteenth-century AME Evangelists. Regarding the legacies of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Amanda Berry Smith, and Julia Foote, one could say their impact extends to all women who seek to participate in the church as equals regardless of the vocation women accept. Gilkes suggests that in some instances a church mother has helped open the pulpit to women preachers even if her own ministry is focused outside of it. Gilkes, "Roles of Church and Community Mothers," 50.

¹⁹ Textual documentation is, with rare exception, a privilege of free people. At a minimum, a sermon manuscript would have required literacy, and a living situation with a degree of safety that was usually only available in Northern states. The limited number of sermon manuscripts by African-American women may also be attributed to the high orality often associated with African-American preaching and the low literacy rates throughout the African-American community during the nineteenth century.

influence of the Spirit' and began to 'exercise an authority, greater in many cases than that of ministers.'²⁰

This elusive black female preacher of the late nineteenth century inspires Toni Morrison's character, "Baby Suggs, holy" in the novel *Beloved*. As Judylyn S. Ryan explains, "Even more numerous were the (formerly) enslaved southern Black women like Baby Suggs, holy, who, without benefit of denominational affiliation or literacy, spoke to the spiritual and psychological needs of the majority enslaved Black population."²¹ I see these preachers who are historically figured in Baby Suggs, holy, as forebears to the church mother preacher precisely because they are "uncalled, unrobed," and "unanointed," and yet preach the Word in their faith communities.²²

Much research remains to be done on African-American church mothers, but the current research yields a complicated picture.²³ As noted, the figure is present across multiple denominations and theological traditions, including some that support women's ordination and some that do not.²⁴ One can also trace lines of continuity outside of Protestantism and find correlations in Roman Catholicism and Neo-African

²⁰ Hardy, 19.

²¹ Judylyn S. Ryan, 275. Ryan notes that Maria W. Stewart, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote and Amanda Berry Smith did not preach alone.

²² Ryan, 279; Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 87.

²³ Butler notes the paucity of historical research saying, "Although both Gilkes and Lincoln and Mamiya provide cultural explanations for the role of the church mother, little information exists to help define what the role of church mothers has been historically." Butler, 44.

²⁴ Gilkes notes that there may be differences in the nature of a church mother's ministry along denominational lines. She comments on different emphases for Baptist and Methodist church mothers when compared to Pentecostal and Holiness church mothers. Gilkes, "Roles of Church and Community Mothers," 50.

traditions.²⁵ For example, the Spiritual Church, a sect that melds elements of Protestantism with aspects of Catholicism, Afro-Caribbean Vodou, and Italian folk religion, has “mothers” and “Reverend Mothers.” The level of agency these women exercise is particularly strong as is often the case in black sects.²⁶ All of these potential streams of influence suggest that vast syncretism may be at work in the role of the church mother.

Qualifications

Naturally, these varied historical and theological influences shape the church mother’s qualifications. Mystical experience may function as a criterion. For Mother Catherine Seals of the Spiritual Church in New Orleans, the call to preach came after being miraculously healed from a paralytic stroke.²⁷ In the Church of God in Christ, criteria seem to include a history of service to the congregation, a reputation for holy living, and a dose of charisma.²⁸ Activism may also be added to this list as it plays an important role for Mother Mamie Till Mobley. Mobley is the mother of Emmett Till, who was lynched in Money, Mississippi in 1955. Mrs. Mobley had a quasi-Marian influence on the African-American community following the discovery of Till’s body.²⁹

²⁵ Yvonne Chireau, “Prophetess of the Spirits: Mother Leaf Anderson and the Black Spiritual Churches of New Orleans,” in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (London and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 303.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 305, 310. Chireau also suggests a tie to American indigenous beliefs, noting that Mother Leaf Anderson, the founder of the Spiritual Church, was said to have Native American ancestry that was visibly reflected in her ceremonial garments. Further, Black Hawk, Raging Bull, Red Cloud, and White Eagle were regularly summoned as a part of worship.

²⁷ Chireau, 308.

²⁸ Butler, 45-46.

²⁹ I make this comparison to the Virgin Mary on the basis of Mary’s public grief amounting to a sermon, as discussed in Chapter Four, and on the basis of the longstanding comparison of the cross to the lynching

She brought national attention to racialized violence by grieving publicly, insisting on an open casket, and daily attending the sham trial in which Emmett's attackers were acquitted. She continued to use her prophetic voice more than thirty years after the death of her son.³⁰

Clearly, the qualifications for a church mother vary depending on her life story and the theological context of her church, but Toni Morrison touches the core of the matter with her character Baby Suggs, holy. The central qualifier for Baby Suggs, holy is a compelling vision of grace that honors the full humanity and belovedness of the black community.³¹ This vision of grace that resonates with the community undergirds the qualifications listed above—mystical experience, history of service, reputation for holy living, charisma, and public activism.

It also seems to help if a church mother can draw on a call narrative. Mother Lizzie Robinson, from the Church of God in Christ, leans on a prophetic call narrative:

One day, while we were playing, I heard someone call me
Liz. . . they called me three times, Liz, Liz, Liz. I did not
know who it was that called me. My mother was in the
field and when she came home I told her someone had
called me. She said, don't answer when someone calls you

tree in the African-American community. James Cone explains this comparison powerfully. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

³⁰ Mother Mobley was featured in *Jet* magazine articles in 1984 and 1985 for her activism and hands-on support of youth. She delighted in helping youth prepare for oratorical contests. Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*, 87.

³¹ Ryan states, "In claiming the right and responsibility of spiritual leader and preacher, Baby Sugg's sole qualification is the vision of grace that came with the recognition that her heart was always already beating. Despite a lifetime of enslavement by Whites, *her* humanity was intact." Ryan, 280. Carroll A. Watkins Ali notes the importance of African-American literature in pastoral care and specifically discusses Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Carroll A. Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 96.

like that or you will die, so don't answer. She did not know about Eli calling Samuel.³²

Part of Mother Robinson's challenge, however, was negotiating what appears to her to be a call to preach within the patriarchal structures of the Church of God in Christ.

Robinson is qualified to become a church mother not on the basis of the call alone but on the basis of her ability to mold her response to the call into a form that adheres to church polity. In other words, her call must be complemented by demonstrated respect for church doctrine. Robinson's deft negotiation is revealed in an address to church women in South Fort Pickering, Arkansas:

The women were turned over to me and I asked, how many preachers are there? Thirty-two stood up. I asked, who told you to preach? I took them right down to the Bible. One said that God had spoken to her out of the cloud and told her to preach, out of the air, I said, well, the devil is the prince of the air and no one told you to preach but the devil. You are no Preacher. This is the way I started to work in this church. I began to teach. The saints need to be taught."³³

Mother Robinson held a hard line between preaching, which she associated with a male domain, and teaching, which was a role open to women.³⁴ For Robinson, who would eventually wield enormous authority as the head of the Women's Department in the Church of God in Christ, teaching was a means to submit to patriarchal authority on the one hand, and calibrate that authority on the other.³⁵ As a teacher, Mother Robinson

³² Butler, 13.

³³ Ibid., 39.

³⁴ Ibid., 35.

³⁵ Ibid., 35-36. Hardy also notes that church mothers in the Church of God in Christ "established a parallel power structure to that of male clergy. They exercised separate spiritual authority over the women in the

held considerable power over biblical interpretation, doctrine, ecclesial practice and behavior for church members.³⁶

Other church mothers appealed to Deborah, who “arose a mother in Israel.”³⁷ Such appeals to maternity can operate on multiple levels. On the surface, they might draw on acceptable norms like compassion and gentleness that are often associated with mothering. Yet these appeals can also expand a woman’s authority and license to speak. When a woman can present her ministry as a form of mothering she can often increase her opportunities to minister.³⁸ For instance, the first woman in the United States to lead a predominantly black denomination as bishop was Mother Mary Magdalena Tate, who founded of the Church of the Living God in 1903.³⁹ She opens a letter to her flock with the salutation, “Now, loving children,” and proceeds to teach about the potential both men and women have to become “sons of God.”⁴⁰ She closes her letter with the phrase, “Bye, bye, from your own Dear Mother.”⁴¹ Mother Tate’s efforts reveal how hard it can be to faithfully answer a call to ministry even in a tradition where women’s leadership is purportedly accepted.

congregation and they had profound influence over the entire congregation, often constraining the power of male pastors.” Hardy, 20.

³⁶ Butler, 36.

³⁷ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “‘Together and in Harness:’ Women’s Traditions in the Sanctified Church” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, edited by Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 637. Gilkes cites Judges 5:7.

³⁸ Hardy, 20; Butler, 2.

³⁹ Hardy, 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 20-21, citing *Mary Lena Lewis Tate: Collected Letters and Manuscripts*, ed. Meharry H. Lewis (Nashville: New and Living Way, 2003), 36-41.

⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

Finding the Church Mother

Mother Tate's lively letter raises another question: Given the many theological and structural variations in play, where should one look to find the church mother in the act of preaching? I see glimpses in the sanctuary, in the choir stand, in the public square, and on the church's fringe. I will address each venue in turn.

I. The Sanctuary

Sometimes a church mother might be found exhorting right under the pulpit. One such church mother is Mother Pollard, whom Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. fondly remembers for helping him come to voice during a frightening time in his ministry:

During the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, one of the most dedicated participants was an elderly Negro woman that we affectionately called Mother Pollard. Although poverty-stricken and uneducated, she was amazingly intelligent and possessed a deep understanding of the meaning of the movement. Once she was asked several weeks of walking whether she was tired. 'My feet is tired,' she answered, 'but my soul is rested.' This was just one example of her ungrammatical profundity. One Monday evening, after having gone through a tension-packed week which included being arrested and receiving numerous threatening calls, I went to the mass meeting depressed and fear-stricken. In my address I tried desperately to give an overt impression of strength and courage, **but deep down within the soil of my inner life was the nagging serpent of fear which left me poisoned with the fangs of depression.** At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, 'Come here son.' I immediately walked over and gave her a big hug. Then she said 'something is wrong with you. You didn't talk strong tonight.' Seeking to keep my fears to myself I retorted, 'Oh, no, Mother Pollard, nothing is

wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever.’ ‘Now you can’t fool me,’ she said; ‘I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain’t doing things to please you? or is it that the white folks is bothering you?’ Before I could answer she looked directly into my eyes and said, ‘I don told you we is with you all the way.’ And then with a countenance beaming with quiet certainty she concluded, ‘but even if we aint with you, God’s gonna take care of you.’ Everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when she uttered these consoling words.

Mother Pollard has now passed on to glory. Since that dreary night in 1956 I have known very few quiet days. I have been tortured without and tormented within by the raging fires of tribulation. Day in and day out I have been forced to stand up amid howling winds of pain and jostling storms of adversity. **Times without number I have learned that life has not only sun-lit moments of joy but also fog-packed moments of sorrow;** but as the years have unfolded the majestic words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace to **the hinterlands of** my troubled soul. ‘God’s gonna take care of you.’ This is the faith that can transform the whirlwind of despair into the soothing breeze of hope. (Emphasis in original)⁴²

Two issues are worthy of note here. First, Mother Pollard is heavily invested in the preached word. She demonstrates a sense of responsibility for the preaching that takes place in her faith community as well as a sense of concern for King personally.⁴³ Second, her words carry the energy, the zeal, and I would even say the Good News in King’s story. King quotes her words, “God’s gonna take care of you.” She is the primary witness and King is the echo. This pattern repeats the one Anthea Butler sees in which

⁴² Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Vol. VI, Advocate of the Social Gospel: September 1948-March 1963*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Susan Englander, Troy Jackson and Gerald L. Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 544-45.

⁴³ Mother Pollard’s disposition is in keeping with the Black Church’s tradition of taking an assertive role in molding its preachers. Cleophus LaRue, “Two Ships Passing in the Night,” in *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today*, ed. Mike Graves (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 136.

pastors take messages church mothers proclaim in small circles and proclaim them from the pulpit.⁴⁴ The pastor “amplifies the teachings and doctrines that the church mothers have already imparted.”⁴⁵

II. The Choir Stand

Thanks in large part to the inspired genius of Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith, the church mother might also be found preaching in the choir stand. Mother Smith is credited for introducing the “song and sermonette,” a gospel music style in which a soloist includes a short sermon as part of the song.⁴⁶ The sermon generally lasts between five and ten minutes and may occur at the beginning, middle, or end of the song.⁴⁷ Mother Smith noted that she often faced male resistance. She remembers having to “beat down” pastors who would not allow her to sing from the pulpit, encountering deacons who did not like the ways she moved her body while singing, and struggling with others who did not pay her adequately.⁴⁸ Despite these obstacles, the

⁴⁴ Butler, 49.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Clarence Boyer and Lloyd Yearwood, *How Sweet the Sound: The Golden Age of Gospel* (Washington: Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1995), 136. The song and sermonette style was popularized by Edna Gallmon Cooke and Rev. Shirley Caesar. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Shirley Caesar and the Souls of Black Folk: Gospel Music as Cultural Narrative and Critique,” *The African American Pulpit* 6, no. 2 (2003): 13. Dorothy Norwood takes a similar approach and inserts stories in songs such as “The Denied Mother.” In his analysis of “The Denied Mother,” Clarence Boyer notes the homiletical dynamics: “Throughout the recording the audience has participated as if they were responding to a preacher, and that is the role Norwood takes in the performance. Like C.L. Franklin would, she begins the story in her normal speaking voice. As the story progresses and the spirit arises, she moves into the key of the organ and piano that accompany her with sustained and staccato chords and begins to chant the story. By the time she reaches the end, she has turned her narrative into song.” Boyer and Yearwood, 224-225.

⁴⁷ Boyer and Yearwood, 136.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

song and sermonette became both a staple in gospel music and a way to preach, as

Shirley Caesar makes clear:

The Lord called me to the melody of song and the ministry
of the Word; He called me to use music to preach. Anyone
who has been to any of my group's concerts or who has
attended my church knows this is what I do: I sing a
sermon and I preach a song. I'm a singing evangelist.⁴⁹

The song and sermonette is just one path a church mother might take in her preaching.

If the church mother is not much of a vocalist, she might just as easily weave her sermon into the morning prayer. This process might be facilitated by the use of a syncopated, antiphonal style commonly associated with black preaching.⁵⁰

III. The Street

By no means is the church mother bound to the church grounds. She brings her weakened body to street ministries, classrooms, city halls, and other spaces where justice is sought.⁵¹ For example, when a "Mother Williams" arrives at a tense urban sit-in, she transforms the atmosphere and prevents arrests.⁵² It is not uncommon for a church mother to count a politician, activist minister or agency head among her "children."⁵³ There is an edge at work when a church mother places her weak body in a

⁴⁹ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Shirley Caesar and the Souls of Black Folk," 13.

⁵⁰ James Melvin Washington, *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), xxxiii. While not referring directly to the church mother, James Weldon Johnson notes the influence of women prayer leaders who used a syncopated antiphonal style common in black preaching. James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, Drawings by Aaron Douglas, Lettering by C.B. Falls (New York: Viking Press, 1927), 11.

⁵¹ Butler, 3. Butler speaks of the church mother's sanctified body here but the sanctification she draws on is fueled in part by the experience African-American women have as the "mules of the world."

⁵² Gilkes, "Roles of Church and Community Mothers," 49.

⁵³ Ibid.

place where power is publicly contested. Her physical presence may mark even more of an interruption than that of an ordained preacher's due to the ways the church has been complicit with the empire.⁵⁴ The church mother's message, then, is both spoken and enacted and can rely on bodily performance much like Julian, the Apostle Paul or Jeremiah and Isaiah who use sign-acts. For the church mother, the weak body is a rhetor that contributes to a Sibylline form of authority in which a frail body is matched with an enlarged voice. Drawing on this idea, Toni Morrison's *Baby Suggs*, holy speaks with a "busted" body.⁵⁵ Her "legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue" ail her.⁵⁶ This suffering shades her words when she preaches on the goodness of the body.⁵⁷

The idea that a church mother's arthritic knees might testify to a life of prayer and give her words more weight is at work in the congregation's tactile response to her ministry. For example, in a marked shift from customary open seating practices, the church mother's seat is formally or informally reserved.⁵⁸ After her death, a black cloak may drape the seat in her honor.⁵⁹ This kind of care for the seat is reminiscent of that accorded to the *kathedra* for a bishop; it indicates an apostolic form of authority. Care of the church mother's seat suggests respect for her body and not just her message. On

⁵⁴ Charles Campbell provides a helpful discussion of preachers as "agents of interruption" in Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 154.

⁵⁵ Ryan, 279; Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 87.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Gilkes, 103. Gilkes notes that the church mother is among the few people honored with a reserved seat.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

this note, the affection directed her way is also insightful. While preachers are typically greeted with a handshake, the church mother draws hugs, kisses on the cheek, and long pats on the back. Some of this affection might be explained by fictive kinship relationships in the Black Church or by the way older black female bodies are read as safe and nurturing, but there seems to be more at work. These tactile signs of respect point to her role as the embodied “repository of both belief and culture” within the faith community.⁶⁰ This characterization is at work inside the sanctuary and outside in the public square.

IV. The Fringe

The church mother’s witness in the public square grows out of her presence on the fringe of the institutional church. The fringe is akin to a mixed shoreline where the church meets those whom it has rejected, those who resist or reject the church, and those who have varying degrees of curiosity about the church’s meaning and message. Mother Lucy Smith of the All Nations Pentecostal Church envisions this broad fringe when she names herself “mother to the drifting black masses.”⁶¹ Mother Smith’s Chicago-based radio program gave her some power over these masses and in this respect she is atypical.⁶² Church mothers are more often situated on the fringe and not over it. Even within the congregational context the church mother tends to sit on the periphery. Despite her more central role as repository of culture and belief, declining

⁶⁰ Butler, 2.

⁶¹ Hardy, 22.

⁶² Ibid.

health, limited mobility and the stigma associated with physical frailty push the church mother to the margins of the church.⁶³ I would go as far as to say that it is not just brevity that makes the church mother a preacher of “little sermonettes,” but social invisibility as well.⁶⁴ Social capital and notoriety separate the Mother Pollards from the Dr. Kings. Thus, the fringe is not just a space the church mother occasionally occupies but a status she embodies.⁶⁵

Racialization places the church mother on the fringe. While the medieval anchoress is engaged in a form of voluntary exile, the church mother inherits exile by virtue of the coalescing impact of race, gender and age. Part of the “birthright of blackness” is “an inherent lack of safety, ambiguity, indeterminacy, and a dangerous

⁶³ Harold Dean Trulear, “To Make a Wounded Wholeness: Disability and Liturgy in an African American Context” in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, edited by Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

⁶⁴ Butler, 44. Butler cites Gilkes.

⁶⁵ It is not a stretch to say black women have physically embodied the fringe in the West. A number of references could be offered to support the Black woman’s history as an outsider. The story of Saartjie Baartman suggests the Black female was a social outsider to the European world. Baartman became more widely known as the “Hottentot Venus” as part of a longstanding European exhibition of her body during the nineteenth century. Details of her story are explored in Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). By the nineteenth century, black women were articulating experiences of marginality within the broader culture and within the African-American community. On this note, Anna Julia Cooper famously asserts, “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*’” Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, With an Introduction by Mary Helen Washington (Xenia, OH: Aldine Printing House, 1892; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 31. It also seems worth noting that Toni Morrison’s character Baby Suggs, holy ministers in the wake of the actual plight of Margaret Garner, a historical woman. Garner’s fringe status as a runaway slave mother is only exacerbated when she murders her two year old daughter, Mary in an attempt to prevent the child’s re-enslavement. Garner’s experience underscores the black female body as a symbol of the outsider. Mark Reinhardt provides a history of Garner’s case and reflections on the power dynamics in *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner: The True Story that Inspired Toni Morrison’s Beloved* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

sense of twoness.”⁶⁶ A hindered ability to self-actualize further complicates this birthright.⁶⁷ One task of the Black religious tradition is to account for “what it means to be religious when safety is theologically and sociologically in question, and when to attempt self-actualization is met with certain danger.”⁶⁸ Howard Thurman frames the issue by saying, “There is one overmastering problem that the socially and politically disinherited always face: Under what terms is survival possible?”⁶⁹ As a key player in the life of the Black Church, the church mother helps address this haunting question for herself and others.

A position on the fringe makes the church mother adept at offering insights that register as credible to people “with their backs against the wall.”⁷⁰ Part of her aptitude can be attributed to her reliance on “discredited knowledge,” that is, the knowledge that emerges from the beliefs, values, and experiences associated with African-American culture.⁷¹ An African cosmology is prominent in this epistemology and in it

⁶⁶ El Kornegay, Jr., *A Queering of Black Theology: James Baldwin’s Blues Project and Gospel Prose* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 20.

⁶⁷ Ibid. Kornegay goes on to say, “The birthright of blackness contrasts greatly with the birthright of whiteness with its pinpoint clarity, high capacity for self-actualization, and unchallenged safety fully integrated and available at birth.”

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Foreword by Vincent Harding (Nashville: Abingdon, 1949; Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 20. Survival that is defined by terror is not the goal Thurman pursues. He notes that the “underprivileged in any society are the victims of a perpetual war of nerves” and seeks a practice of Christianity that enables people to face fear with dignity. Ibid., 40.

⁷⁰ Howard Thurman describes people “with their backs against the wall” as those “who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity.” He laments that these people have often found Christianity to be “sterile and of little avail.” Authentic Christianity, in his view, empowers the weak and defenseless. Ibid., 11.

⁷¹ Toni Morrison explains that “Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was ‘discredited.’” She also notes that discredited knowledge has a prominent role in her work. Ryan, 268; Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1984), 342.

God, spirits, and ancestors are understood to be continually active and engaged in human affairs.⁷²

The fringe functions in still another way. Because she is not groomed for an official form of ecclesiastical authority, the church mother can more easily offer an uncensored word. As noted in Chapter Three, censorship is most effective in its prophylactic form.⁷³ In other words, speech is best policed in unspoken ways that prevent the unspeakable from ever being spoken rather than merely retracted after the fact. One way the pulpit is censored is through the formation of insiders, particular kinds of people who will adhere to set norms and respect the status quo. The church mother has the potential to subvert prophylactic censorship because she is not beholden to the ecclesiastical power structure. As a result, she is not easily disciplined when she transgresses.⁷⁴

Finally, the very motive for preaching can be linked to an orientation on the fringe. The church mother is motivated by responsibility for the Black community and its struggles, and these concerns outweigh rationales based solely on women's rights. The exigencies of life and the Black religious tradition work in tandem to compel the church mother's leadership.⁷⁵

⁷² Ryan, 269.

⁷³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 130.

⁷⁴ Perhaps the most effective way to silence a church mother is to dismiss her as a crazy old lady. As a crusader and dissident, Ella Baker senses this type of rebuke from male church leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. She speaks specifically of Martin Luther King, Jr. not treating her as an equal, saying, "After all, who was I? I was female, I was old. I didn't have any Ph.D." Ransby, 173.

⁷⁵ Ryan, 276.

In sum, then, a church mother anchors the church with her example of holiness and words of grace. She proclaims the gospel outside the official structures of the church. She could even be imagined as preaching in the shadow of the pulpit whether that shadow is imagined to loom over space in the sanctuary, the choir loft or out to the street. While each church mother exercises her ministry with different emphases, a proclamatory role in some form is standard. Messages tend to reflect the demands of the Black religious tradition and incorporate historically discredited knowledge as well as content considered orthodox in the church mother's faith community.

This survey of the form and context of the church mother's preaching raises another question: What might the church mother find compelling about Julian of Norwich's preaching? Or, rather, where might an anchoress and a church mother find common theological ground? There are a number of possibilities, but three issues stand out. These include an emphasis on the weak body as a rhetor, willingness to take risks, and a position on the frontier.

Embodied Weakness

It may help to offer a short summation of the anchoress' view of the body's role in proclamation. Much like the Stylite model, the anchoress gives the body a central role. Her confined body is part of a continual performance of the gospel. By contemporary standards her voluntary confinement may signify harshness toward the body. It is easy to under appreciate the anchoress' sense of the body's grandeur, but for

her the body is first and foremost a divine gift and companion in sanctification.⁷⁶ The body is not an obstacle to preaching, as if the Word could be better proclaimed if crystallized out of the ether or as if a purer gospel would emerge if it were not sifted through a human vessel. Anchorites see a miracle when human beings, though weak and finite, feel moved by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel. This corporeal aspect of preaching is part of the gospel's extravagance. The anchoress is at home with the scandal of God being made known through human bodies.

The theological rationale for the anchoress' understanding of embodied preaching (revealed in the "homily" of her body) centers on Jesus and the sermon he enacted on the cross.⁷⁷ His body was a rhetor intercepting the norms of power governing human life and part of the mystery that was enacted in the cross emerged from the way bodily normativity and muscularity gave way to weakness. As a result, the anchoress must reckon with the scorned body of Jesus. One aspect of this struggle is the Pauline refusal to hide the body's vulnerability during gospel proclamation.⁷⁸ On a practical level, this would suggest tears, trembling, sweating, and fatigue have a place in preaching but these particulars are secondary. More fundamental is a thorough

⁷⁶ Carolyn Walker Bynum discusses the understanding medieval women had toward the body and asceticism in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987). Bynum argues that "medieval efforts to discipline and manipulate the body should be interpreted more as elaborate changes rung upon the *possibilities* provided by fleshliness than as flights from physicality," and she goes on to say, "Women saw themselves not as flesh opposed to spirit, female opposed to male, nurture opposed to authority; they saw themselves as human beings—fully spirit and fully flesh. And they saw all humanity as created in God's image, as capable of imitatio Christi through body as well as soul. Thus they gloried in the pain, the exudings, the somatic distortions that made their bodies parallel to the consecrated wafer on the altar and the man on the cross." Bynum, 6, 296.

⁷⁷ Susan Keefe, email message to author, March 17, 2012.

⁷⁸ Susan Eastman, *Recovering Paul's Mother Tongue: Language and Theology in Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 77.

theology of weakness that shapes both the content and the performance of preaching. This theology of weakness is part of Julian's anchoritic inheritance. She claims it when she destigmatizes sickness and suggests that Christians who suffer are on the cross with Jesus.⁷⁹ Anchoritic theology insists on a theological anthropology that honors the full humanity of weak bodies. An anchoritic theology of preaching simply will not relax in the face of a cool, muscled body flexing its normativity and daring to function as a "warrant" for the gospel (Dr. Willie Jennings, personal communication, April 27, 2010). The anchoritic paradigm does not accommodate a slick vision of preaching or a triumphalist Christology.

As for correlations, strength in weakness is equally important to the church mother's preaching. Weakness often functions as a Christological starting point in the Black Church and consequently may influence the content of the church mother's preaching. More broadly, the aging black female body is culturally marked as vulnerable. This vulnerability informs the church mother's community activism and symbolic presence in congregational life.⁸⁰

One important distinction is worth flagging here. The church mother's body is vulnerable but dignified. Dignity flows from claiming the full humanity of the black female body. The terms of that dignity are complex and in some cases have turned on a vision of sanctification that was built on white assimilation. In these cases, the holiness

⁷⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 193; Spearing, 71.

⁸⁰ Bodily weakness may also accompany the initial call to preach as was the case for both Julian and Mother Catherine Seals. Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25. Chireau, 308.

of black women was determined by the degree their comportment mirrored that of privileged white women. As a result, the feasible paths of resistance and racial uplift were themselves compromised, resulting in a theological bind.

Risk

Julian had an unusually high tolerance for risk. Daring to write in the vernacular within smelling distance of the site where heretics were burned at the stake is just one indication of her boldness. Rather than remain silent in the face of broad-scaled censorship, she chooses to craft a rhetorical space for herself and walk the tightrope between wholly compromised rhetoric and certain censure. To some degree, I see Julian's willingness to risk as the fruit of an English anchoritic tradition modeled on John the Baptist. As I discussed in Chapter One, John's example of speaking an uncensored word that echoes from his grave was a part of Julian's anchoritic heritage. The experiences of extreme unction and ritual death that were typically associated with anchoritic enclosure would have likely underscored Julian's prophetic voice and willingness to risk for the sake of the gospel.

Similarly, the church mother has considerable license to speak and is not expected to censor herself.⁸¹ By speaking so boldly and even challenging the pastor or others in authority, she has the role of a prophet in her community and is a counterbalance to the pastor in this respect. She can bear the risks associated with speaking a bold word because of the unofficial nature of her authority. For the church

⁸¹ Butler, 2.

mother, the direst risks are those borne by the faith community when the resources of the Black religious tradition are not sufficiently distilled to the flock.

Frontier

Risk is facilitated by a frontier sensibility, and Julian certainly has one.⁸² The anchorhold itself was a symbol of the wilderness. The anchorhold marked a liminal space that was at the same time within the very belly of the church and situated on its farthest edge. As an anchoress, Julian had the critical vantage point of one who was on the geographical, social, and personal frontier.⁸³ She also had a “permanent condition of sacred ‘outsiderhood’” and a “statusless status.”⁸⁴ Julian enjoyed the freedom that is reserved for those who are not courting institutional power.

Julian’s position on the frontier also enabled her to function as a “Mother of Souls.” “Mother of Souls,” is a term British novelist and theologian Charles Williams uses to describe one who nurtures spiritual desire and freedom.⁸⁵ This form of spiritual mothering is not comparable to the tender rocking of infants or the suckling of newborns. Instead, it involves nurturing the wildness and freedom that are essential to

⁸² Her anchorhold in the city of Norwich marked a symbolic wilderness but wilderness nonetheless. Ann K. Warren explains that anchorholds symbolized the wilderness whether situated in rural or urban areas. Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 12-13.

⁸³ Christopher Holdsworth, “Christina of Markyate” in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker, Studies in Church History, Subsidia, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 203.

⁸⁴ Christopher Holdsworth, “Hermits and the Powers of the Frontier,” in *Reading Medieval Studies* 16 (1990): 68-69.

⁸⁵ Merrill Ware Carrington, “A Final Test of Holiness,” lecture at the Evelyn Underhill Association Annual Day of Quiet Reflection, June 15, 2013, Washington, DC. Apparently, Williams is thinking specifically of Evelyn Underhill and the relationship she had with people for whom she provided spiritual care. Carrington quotes a statement Underhill made at a 1933 retreat that sheds light on the Mother of Souls role, “The final test of holiness is not seeming very different from other people, but being used to make other people very different; becoming the parent of new life.”

the soul's growth. The goal is not to create clones of the mother but to foster bold and independent voices that are generative themselves. The Mother of Souls nurtures voice, guards against co-optation and self-censoring, and looks for the surprising work of the Holy Spirit.

We can look to Julian's life story for an example here.⁸⁶ Her only documented advisee is Margery Kempe, who comes knocking on the anchorhold door with a disruptive word that manifests as high-pitched shrieks and sobs, barely discernible as divine. As a Mother of Souls who is formed by a life on the frontier and attuned to the ways of the Spirit, Julian recognizes Margery's gifts. There is no indication that Julian counseled Margery to tone down her preaching or comport herself differently. Instead, it appears Julian affirmed Margery and sent her off into the world as a pilgrim-preacher. One can conclude that the frontier informs not only Julian's counsel but her vision of the preaching task overall.

The anchoritic frontier parallels the church mother's fringe. Both spheres function as a space the proclaimer occupies as well as a theological framework. Camped out on the fringe, the church mother finds the utility of socially discredited knowledge and mines the riches of the Black religious tradition. She can also offer the unchurched a non-coercive vision of the life of faith.

⁸⁶ This example stems from Margery Kempe's account of her meeting with Julian. Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. B.A. Windeatt (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 77-78.

What Shall I Do?

Together, the model of preaching offered by Julian of Norwich, and those provided by African-American church mothers suggest that weakness, risk, and an affinity for the fringe sit at the very heart of preaching. Answering the call to preach demands becoming better acquainted with each of these domains. As a result, the pool of Christians who have answered the call is likely far larger than many of the current scholarly histories of preaching might suggest. The task of finding these preachers will likewise require re-imagining the search and looking below the radar.

While doing research for his 1944 *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, Arthur Huff Fauset interviewed a middle-aged African-American woman whom he calls, “Mrs. W.”⁸⁷ In the course of their work together she shares her call to preach:

Then one day I had a dream I felt myself lifted on a high mountain. It was so high I could look and see over the world. When I looked behind me it seemed as if the sun was going down right at my back. It looked like it does in the country. Looks like if you went to the end of the field you could touch it. Then a voice said to me, “This represents the son of God. It’s almost down. You must warn men and women to be holy.” I rushed down from the mountain crying. When I got down, there was a host of people waiting for me to listen to me. I talked to them. Then I woke up. Things went on so and so for two or three days. Then the same thing appeared in the kitchen while I was doing the dishes. I was wide awake. I clapped my hands. Then I went to a woman and asked her, ‘What shall I do?’⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Hardy, 15.

⁸⁸ Hardy, 18-19.

This vivid call story does not make it into Fauset's book and nor does Mrs. W.⁸⁹ In fact, no one knows what became of her call. It is quite possible that she found her niche among the ordinands in a highly visible leadership role. It is equally likely that she lived out her call to preach in a more embedded way, that is to say, becoming "Mother W" rather than "Reverend W." If so, she took a sacred path indeed—one worthy of considerably more homiletical attention.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to provide a snapshot of the church mother's proclamatory ministry without romanticizing it or reducing its depth. The limited research that is available demanded that I work with a fairly broad period of American history and a wide-ranging theological spectrum. A number of compelling questions remain: How can the proclamatory aspects of this role be accentuated? What boundaries, if any, obstruct the church mother's flourishing? In what ways will the rise in women's ordination impact the ministry of church mothers? Beneath these questions lay more fundamental ones that have driven this project, specifically, what patterns and presuppositions work to domesticate Christian preaching? Whose proclamation is rendered illegible in current constructs and what kinds of proclamation thrive on the church's fringe? Church mothers' preaching provides one set of answers to these questions.

⁸⁹ Hardy, 15.

It bears repeating that the foregoing discussion on church mothers is only a sketch. It is included to illustrate the continuing relevance of Julian's preaching and the value of the English anchoritic tradition to contemporary homiletics. Since Christian pulpits will likely continue to be highly censored spaces for the foreseeable future, Julian's insights are all the more critical.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I sought to reveal Julian as more than a mystic or holy woman. I sought to reveal her as a preacher. And I sought to look beneath the saccharin, docile portraits of Julian and attend to the boldness with which she proclaimed the gospel in word and deed.

In Chapter One, "A Prophetic Vocation," I argued that anchoriticism had a proclamatory focus. In making this case I discussed the contemplative and active dimensions of anchoritic enclosure. I also explained that John the Baptist was a paradigmatic figure for medieval English anchorites, and anchorites took efforts to affiliate themselves with him.

In Chapter Two, "Genre and Power," I focused more specifically on Julian's writings. I sought to address the contention that Julian could not be a preacher because she did not, at least to our knowledge, preach orally in a pulpit during a worship service. I responded to this concern by noting that the medieval English sermon genre was a broad one and included treatises, poetry, drama, and devotional writings that never came to speech. I explained that publication was a means of announcement, or rather, a means of bringing a writer's message into the public square and into communal reading circles where the work would be spoken aloud. Further, I noted the risks Julian faced by writing in the vernacular since vernacular devotional writings were subject to legal sanction.

In an effort to discern Julian's intention to preach, I attended to the strategic alignments she makes with well-known women preachers: Saint Cecelia and Saint Mary Magdalene. I discussed how these associations provided listeners with a frame for hearing Julian's words. Then, having examined both her writings and her deliberate association with women preachers, I turned to a key moment in *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* in which Julian seemed to deny that she was seeking prophetic authority. I pointed to the ways her denial actually functioned as an assertion of authority and an effort to dismantle typical counterarguments to women's preaching.

I turned to the question of how Julian preached in Chapter Three, "Preaching like Paul." I argued that Julian's preaching mirrored the Apostle Paul's in three key respects. First, both Paul and Julian exegete Jesus' body as the primary text. Second, both draw on a theology that highlights human weakness. Tactility and the grotesque are favored tools for exploring that weakness. Third, both Paul and Julian put their bound bodies to work in the preaching task. Through text, theology, and performance, Julian draws on a Pauline model of embodied proclamation.

Julian makes it clear that her preaching is motivated by love. I explored love's authorizing power for Julian in Chapter Four, "Preacher as Lover." I argued that Julian relies on erotic authority. After defining this term and explaining Audre Lorde's rationale for originating it, I discussed its relevance for Christian preaching. I pointed to specific instances when Julian relies on erotic authority and I explained how the lover archetype enabled her to negotiate censorship and proclaim the extravagance of the

gospel. I gave special attention to a combination of features that distinguish Julian's use of the lover archetype, namely, adoration, eschatological restlessness, risk, and captivated reason. Then, I suggested that Julian's approach reflects a Marian influence. While a full-scale Marian theology of preaching is beyond the scope of this project, I did enumerate some of the salient characteristics of the Virgin's preaching that seem to appear in Julian's as well.

Julian is not only a preacher. She is a preacher with a legacy. Chapter Five, "In the Shadow of the Pulpit," concerns the contemporary relevance of Julian's mode of preaching. In this chapter I offered a recap of some of the more distinctive aspects of Julian's preaching and reflected on how they might manifest in a contemporary context. Given Julian's broad appeal, I was also determined to consider contemporary proclaimers who were neither Anglican nor Roman Catholic. The chapter focuses on the African-American church mother because I found her to draw on key components of anchoritic theology that proved helpful to Julian. These characteristics included bodily weakness, willingness to take risks, a robust vision of Christian community, and a sense of loyalty to those who dwell on the periphery of the church. I concluded that the church mother embraces the boldness that was so characteristic of Julian's approach to preaching and similarly negotiates censorship in her effort to proclaim the gospel.

This study of Julian of Norwich grows out of concern for the kinds of proclamation that are written out of histories of preaching. I am especially curious about the voices that are silenced or marginalized by our very definition of what counts

as preaching. Having completed this dissertation, I am convinced that adoration sits at the heart of Christian preaching and that the task should be imagined far more democratically.

Finally, while I have focused on Julian's contribution to Christian preaching, I have gained a deeper appreciation of her role as a theologian, Mother of Souls, and teacher of prayer. Her gifts to the church are monumental. Only a small fraction of her insights are represented in this project.

Appendices

Appendix A

Julian of Norwich

The only extant firsthand account of a visit with Julian of Norwich comes from an equally devout, though less conventional source: Margery Kempe. After a multi-day visit sometime around 1413, Margery Kempe sums up her visit by saying, “Great was the holy conversation that the anchoress and this creature had through talking of the love of our Lord Jesus Christ for the many days that they were together.”¹ Prior to this visit, Julian was recommended to Margery as an “expert” in spiritual matters and reputed to be a fountain of wise counsel.² It appears Julian exceeded Margery’s expectations. She cherishes the memory of her visit, remembering Julian’s suggestion to trust that her leadings were divine so long as they “were not against the worship of God and the profit of her fellow Christians.”³ Margery also carried away an image of her soul as “the seat of God” and the assurance that the Holy Ghost would make her soul “stable and steadfast.”⁴ This account sounds a lot like the Julian we come to know in *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*. Yet, beyond Margery’s story and a few testamentary bequests, little is known about Julian of Norwich.⁵

¹ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. B.A. Windeatt (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 77-79.

² Ibid., 77.

³ Ibid., 78.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In the face of the limited factual information on Julian’s life, a couple scholars have offered reconstructions based on their knowledge of medieval English spirituality and the history of East Anglia. These scholars include Amy Frykholm, author of *Julian of Norwich: A Contemplative Biography* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010) and Veronica Mary Rolf, author of *Julian’s Gospel: Illuminating the Life and Revelations of Julian of Norwich* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013). Benedicta Ward’s “Julian the

Historical details on Julian's life are sparse. Most scholars would be delighted just to have a birth name. "Julian" is generally held to be a name given to her upon enclosure at St. Julian's Church in Norwich, and is more a sign of anchoritic erasure than anything else. We can gather from her texts that she was born in late 1342 or early 1343, and could therefore remember the plague or "Black Death" sweeping through England.⁶ Julian's date of death is even more obscure than her birth date. All we know is that it occurred after 1416, based on her inclusion in Isabel Ufford's will.⁷

The climax of her life seems to have come at age thirty and one-half when Julian became gravely ill. The illness itself was an answer to prayer voiced sometime earlier and then forgotten until sickness set in. After struggling for a proverbial three days and three nights, she received last rites. She lingered on for a couple more days and then her curate was called in to witness her death. He held a crucifix before her and it became illumined and bled as she focused on it. Then, sixteen visions unfolded, lasting over a day and a night. For the next roughly fifty years, Julian became entirely consumed with the visions and their import for the church. She was so focused on Christ that she had little interest in relating additional details of her life. Scholars are left to speculate and debate.

Solitary" also moves in this direction in some respects. Benedicta Ward, "Julian the Solitary," in *Julian Reconsidered* by Kenneth Leech and Sister Benedicta Ward (Oxford: SLG Press, 1988): 11-29.

⁶ Watson and Jenkins, 4.

⁷ Ibid., 431.

One series of debates concerns her life prior to enclosure. Benedicta Ward suggests Julian may have been a widow with a deceased child prior to enclosure.⁸ Her analysis challenges the long-held majority view that Julian was a nun at Carrow, a convent situated about a mile from St. Julian's Church, Norwich. Her argument is based in part on the fact that there are no records of Julian at Carrow, and is strengthened by the history of laywomen becoming anchoresses without ever living as monastics.

If Julian were a nun, however, there would be a stronger explanation for her educational training. It seems obvious that she had some form of education, but she described herself as "unletterde."⁹ This description raises questions about whether she was illiterate in the contemporary sense, or proficient in English but operating on little to no training in Latin. I tend towards the latter opinion. It seems likely that she could compose her texts by using vernacular sources. I would also expect her work to have garnered more attention and more of a paper trail if she were able to read Latin.¹⁰ The combination of abstract thought, time consciousness, and allusion to themes developed in different portions of the work all point toward literacy.¹¹ The rhyme, rhythm and

⁸ Benedicta Ward, "Julian the Solitary," 27.

⁹ Watson and Jenkins, 125; Spearing, 42.

¹⁰ Fred Bauerschmidt agrees, commenting on Edmund Colledge and James Walsh's suggestion that Julian was proficient in Latin. Frederick Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 207.

¹¹ Diane F. Krantz, *The Life and Text of Julian of Norwich: The Poetics of Enclosure* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997), 43.

repetition also suggest that some parts may have been composed orally or written with an assumption that the work would be read aloud.¹²

Reflecting on the composition raises questions about Julian's setting for composing the work. Did she write both works in the quiet of the anchorhold? This question is a difficult one because the specific date of Julian's enclosure is unknown. She could have been enclosed shortly after the visions and authored both works as an anchoress, or become enclosed sometime after completing *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, the "Short Text," but before completing *A Revelation of Love*. I find Nicholas Watson most compelling when he argues that Julian wrote the Short Text between 1382 and 1388, and the Long Text at some point after 1393.¹³ By 1393, she had been enclosed and had something of a reputation as a holy woman, prompting Roger Reed, the rector of St. Michael's, Coslany, Norwich, to leave two shillings to "Julian ankorite."¹⁴

If Watson's estimation is accurate, the Long Text may have been circulating after Arundel's Constitutions, legislation issued in 1407 that attempted to censor vernacular theology. The stakes may have been even higher for Julian since she is the first woman known to have written in English.¹⁵ It seems likely that the text would have initially "passed from hand to hand through an informal countrywide network of similarly

¹² Marion Glasscoe has a stronger view. She sees this orality as compelling enough to argue that the work was dictated to an amanuensis. Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), xviii.

¹³ Nicholas Watson, "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*," *Speculum* 68, no. 3 (1993): 666- 677.

¹⁴ Watson and Jenkins, 431. Watson and Jenkins explain that Julian is named in four wills between 1393 and 1416. Julian's anchorhold is named in two additional wills in 1423 and 1428, but these gifts may be intended for her successor unless Julian lived into her eighties. Watson and Jenkins, 432.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

minded people.”¹⁶ I would call this an underground audience. Ideally, these were brave souls who were willing to “reimagine Christian thought in its entirety, not as a system of ideas but as an answer to human need.”¹⁷ Julian needed an audience that was ready to embrace an innovative work—a work that challenged long-held assumptions about God’s wrath and honored both the strength and the intrinsic weakness of the human person.¹⁸

One also gets the sense that the visions are continually forming in Julian and that they can never be finished because they are a life work.¹⁹ On another level, the nature of her task, of relating these visions, is beyond her. Because she is communicating the gospel, she is working with a message that comes to fruition only as the church receives it and begins to live its truth. Her word is one that invites performance and reveals its meaning only as one wades deeper into the life of discipleship.²⁰

The unique nature of the visions resists categorization. I have two chief concerns in this regard. First, I do not want to devalue or dismiss the work with a mystical classification. To the extent that the mystical umbrella has covered texts with primarily

¹⁶ Watson and Jenkins, 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸ Ibid. Watson does not comment on wrath specifically, but describes Julian’s project as “a work with no real precedent: a speculative vernacular theology, not modeled on earlier texts but structured as a prolonged investigation into the divine, whose prophetic goal is to birth a new understanding of human living in the world and of the nature of God in his interactions with the world, not just for theologians but for everyone.”

¹⁹ Fred Bauerschmidt seems to concur, suggesting that Julian was writing well into her seventies. He describes Julian’s book as a “life-project.” Bauerschmidt, 208.

²⁰ Ibid., 192. Here Bauerschmidt quotes Nicholas Lash on the centrality of Christian performance, “Christian practices, as interpretive action, consists in the *performance* of texts which are construed as ‘rendering’, bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, ‘rendered’ the truth of God in human history.”

devotional intent or texts that purport to speak directly for God, this label seems inappropriate. Julian seems quite conscious of her own voice and her reach extends beyond that of individual interior experience.²¹ I am also mindful of the power dynamics at play. Mysticism has been disparaged because some of the most prominent voices are female and because its epistemology challenges the status quo.²²

More recently Julian has been described as a theologian and, while I find this fitting, it is only because I understand “theologian” as an elastic label.²³ When stretched, it includes vibrant Christ-lovers who are driven more by affection for the church than by a desire to garner the respect of established scholars. In other words, “theologian” need not be synonymous with “academic.”²⁴ Given the consensus about there being a prophetic stream in Julian’s work, I have been more interested in examining the homiletical import of her texts. Seeing Julian as a woman proclaiming the gospel is not incompatible with classifying Julian as a theologian, but it does place more weight on her prophetic intent.

²¹ Ibid., 212.

²² Magill offers a thoughtful reflection on Grace Jantzen’s discussion of the ways mystical scholarship has been impeded by pejorative classifications. Kevin Magill, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic or Visionary* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

²³ Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

²⁴ I happen to like Magill’s description of Julian as a “visionary” and his attempt to situate her visions within the Christian community’s public life. Magill, 8.

Appendix B

What is an anchorite?

An anchorite (or “ anchoress” in the feminine) is a religious solitary who withdraws from the world as a form of spiritual expression. Anchorites vowed to remain in a specified space called an “ anchorhold” for a set period of time—usually for the duration of his or her life. This withdrawal was a faith performance that traversed the boundary between public and private, and made the anchorite’s inner life a public profession of Christ’s death and resurrection. Because anchorites were solitary figures and enjoyed considerable freedom, there was considerable variety in the shape of their lives. The discussion that follows will center on English anchorites between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries unless noted otherwise.

Anchorites were bricked in or “ immured” into anchorholds. Physical enclosure was often marked by a solemn rite which accompanied extreme unction. This rite emphasized the permanence of the enclosure, marked the anchorite’s body as holy and consecrated to God, and effectively rendered the anchorite socially dead. Anchorites reminded the community of Christ’s suffering and transcendence, of the need to pray for their beloved dead, and of the exquisite beauty of the human soul.

According to *Ancrene Wisse*, a thirteenth-century compendium of Middle English guidance for anchoresses, the anchoress is one “ anchored under the church as an anchor under a ship, to hold the ship so that neither waves nor storms may overwhelm

it.”¹ As the “anchor” of the church, one cannot escape the insinuation that the anchoress embodied the very heart of faithful life. She was a living metaphor, a pulsating sign of all that the Christian faith purports to hold dear. Thomas Merton presses at this idea when he says the saint’s life “is a sign that Christ lives: that He is risen from the dead, that our faith is not in vain, and that Christ is coming again.”² So the anchoress’ vocation was primarily apostolic and resulted in a living testimony of Christ’s death, resurrection and pending return.³

As Merton suggests, the anchoress is first and foremost a portent or a sign. Her vocation evokes Jesus’ foray into the wilderness to pray and battle with evil, and recalls the lives of Elijah, John the Baptist and other prophets who similarly sought God in the

¹ Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 73; *Ancrene Wisse*, 101. *Ancrene Wisse* included prayers, inspiring narratives and practical guidance. It was originally written by an unknown author during the twelfth century for three young women who were enclosed together. The writings functioned as something akin to a rule of life. According to Grace Jantzen, however, *Ancrene Wisse* is more of an “antiRule” than a rule because flexibility and independence were highly valued. Grace M. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 30.

² Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 274.

³ In using the term “apostolic,” I refer to the discernible commitment to proclaim the Good News of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. An invitation to repent and live in the light of the Kingdom of God is also an essential part of this proclamation. Thomas Merton’s insight on apostolic ministry has been especially helpful. In *Disputed Questions* Merton affirms that apostolic ministry is not limited to those periods when a person is speaking or preparing to speak, but to the person’s longing to simply be with God. In an essay entitled, “The Primitive Carmelite Ideal,” Merton explains, “Generally speaking, the desert was regarded as a special function of that contemplative solitude and necessary in an apostolic Order, though it would not be quite correct to say that the friars went to the desert *to prepare themselves for* apostolic work. That would be a misleading conception. Contemplative solitude has no ulterior purpose, and when it seems to have one, it becomes degenerate, and ceases to be what it pretends to be. The function of the Carmelite desert was not to be merely a place of retirement to which one would have access *before* apostolic labors in order to prepare oneself spiritually or *after* apostolic labor in order to recover and rest. No such pragmatism could ever be fully compatible with the true Carmelite ideal. On the contrary, it would be truer to say that the desert was a place to which the friars went to be most truly what they were called, Carmelites, faithful sons of the Virgin of Carmel and spiritual descendants of Elias. The purpose of the deserts was to give them access to that pure and perfect climate of solitude without which they would never fully be themselves.” Ibid., 260. Merton sees the saint as having a living testimony but makes it clear that the focus of that testimony is not the saint’s own virtues, if he or she can be said to have any. Instead, the saint is the “weak thing in the world caught up by the Spirit of God and transformed by Christ.” Ibid., 278-279.

desert.⁴ This performance of “exile in action” places the anchoress on the precipice between the sacred and the secular.⁵ Paradox sits at the very heart of anchoritic life and marks the solitary as both insider and outsider, powerful and powerless, captive and captivating. As a paradoxical sign, the solitary is able to speak simultaneously to the church and to the world.

Just as there are different types of signs, there are different types of solitaires. Anchorites, sometimes called “recluses,” and on very rare occasions, “includes,” were distinguished from “hermits” beginning around the twelfth century.⁶ Prior to this time, “solitary” might have described either an anchorite or a hermit.⁷ Hermits were wandering solitary figures who dedicated considerable time to prayer and were

⁴ The anchoress is engaged in a form of proclamation that takes the powers and principalities of the world seriously. She is deliberate in her work of challenging the powers. For more on the relationship between proclamation and the powers, see Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

⁵ Michelle M. Sauer, “Privacy, Exile and the Rhetoric of Solitude,” in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 106.

⁶ E.A. Jones sees stabilization around 1215. Jones makes it clear that the modernized terms “anchorite” and “anchoress” come from the medieval terms “ancre or anker” or “ancess” or “ankeresse.” Jones suggests the modernized terms are technically imprecise. E.A. Jones, “Hermits and Anchorites in Historical Context,” in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden and Roger Ellis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 9; Christopher J. Holdsworth, “Christina of Markyate,” in *Medieval Women: Dedicated and Presented to Professor Rosalind M.T. Hill on the Occasion of Her Seventieth Birthday*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia, Vol. I, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 235.

⁷ Christopher Holdsworth suggests that initially there was even some question as to whether and to what extent the hermit or anchorite was religious. Increasingly, ecclesiastical controls worked to label and define solitaires so that they did not continue to occupy this space in the netherworld. Christopher Holdsworth, “Hermits and the Powers of the Frontier” in *Saints and Saints Lives: Essays in Honor of D. H. Farmer, Reading Medieval Studies*, Vol. XVI (Reading, UK: University of Reading, 1990): 55-76. Gerald Owst also provides background on hermits and anchorites in his discussion of solitary preaching. Gerald Robert Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period, c. 1350-1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 111-130.

generally self-sufficient.⁸ Anchorites, as mentioned, remained fixed. For both kinds of solitaires there was still a good deal of overlap in their experiences, social expectations, and ethos.⁹ Considerable independence was a feature of both solitary paths and, until the church began to regiment anchoritic enclosure by screening candidates and setting up protocols for securing anchorholds, people from all walks of life were free to enclose themselves on the Holy Spirit's initiative. A history as a thief, prostitute or murderer was no obstacle, for the life of a recluse was distinguished by his or her devotion in the present rather than by anything that happened in the past.¹⁰ This life of prayer was so consuming that few recluses had the time or inclination to write about their experiences even if there was ability.¹¹

Anchoritic life has always had limited appeal and the numbers of those who have embarked on solitary life are few in number.¹² While it was not uncommon for a town to have an anchorite during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there were never hoards of people seeking to take up this austere way of life. Limited records make it impossible to state with certainty how many recluses lived during the Middle Ages in

⁸ Hermits tended to be male. One wonders if aspects of the hermitic life actually appealed to anchoresses and to what extent the prevalence of anchoresses can be attributed to the limited field of options for women. In *Anchorites and their Patrons*, Ann Warren explains that often women who did seek to become hermits eventually found themselves in monastic communities because of the multiple dangers of desert life, whether physical, spiritual, or in securing basic subsistence. Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 199-201. The instances of failed attempts at hermitic or anchoritic life point to the risk involved in the endeavor.

⁹ Holdsworth, "Christina of Markyate," 235.

¹⁰ *Ancrene Wisse*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

England.¹³ The evidence for their existence is scattered inconsistently through a broad range of sources, including letters, land records, law suits, and ecclesiastical documents. Even when this evidence is marshaled, it is difficult to get meaningful insight on their influence on the basis of numerical presence alone.¹⁴ One gains a better appreciation for the anchorite's role by studying liturgical rites, medieval architecture, artifacts, and texts written by and for recluses.

One of the most respected anchoritic texts is *Ancrene Wisse*, or "Ancrene Riwele." *Ancrene Wisse* is a compendium of prayers and devotional readings designed to guide the anchoress in solitary life. It provides the kind of wisdom and support the anchoress might seek in a mentor and is essentially a substitute for the Desert Father or Mother figure.¹⁵

Anchorholds

It is difficult to understand the anchoritic vocation without reflecting on the anchorhold.¹⁶ The anchorhold was often a room or cluster of rooms attached to the north end of a church and surrounded by a cemetery. The anchorhold usually had two

¹³ Tom Licence notes the attempts of two scholars to catalog them. Tom Licence, *Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 16-17.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18-19. Licence suggests turning to hagiography for a better sense of the anchorite's impact.

¹⁵ *Ancrene Wisse*, 3.

¹⁶ Michelle M. Sauer goes as far as to say, "In anchoritic reality, space, place and occupant become almost interchangeable. The promise to remain in one location is a promise of endurance and of spiritual strength as much as it is a pledge of obedience." Sauer goes on to point out the Desert Fathers as the source for committing to remain in a fixed place because they made formal commitments between their bodies and the stone walls of their cells. Sauer, 104. Sauer also draws on the work of Darlene L. Brooks-Hedstrom, "The 'dwelling place' in Egyptian Monastic Practice" (paper given at the 37th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, MI on 2 May 2002). Brooks-Hedstrom suggests that the practice of pledging one's body to the walls rose out of a line from 1 Peter 2:5 NRSV: "like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

windows: one to the interior of the church allowing the anchorite to participate in mass and another to the exterior allowing the anchoress to witness to the world. Thus, the anchorhold itself marked the anchorite as a medieval Janus of sorts.¹⁷

Timing and locale are also critical issues here because fourteenth-century English anchoriticism had its own patterns. Some fourteenth-century English anchorites followed the tradition of the abbas and ammas rather conventionally. Their anchorholds were located in remote areas or on the edge of town. Yet around the thirteenth century in England a more nuanced approach begins to emerge. Anchorholds began to appear in the heart of bustling cities, stone testimonies of the solitary in the city's midst.¹⁸ This pattern coincides with an increase in female recluses and presents a more nuanced understanding of withdrawal into the wilderness. A literal desert is no longer a mandate for these anchoresses because she can challenge evil and its many faces (pride, greed, envy, lust and sloth) in her own heart. In this sense, the anchoress is engaged in a very public denunciation of the powers of evil in the world and a public profession of the transforming power of Jesus Christ. This combination of

¹⁷ Pauline Matarasso expounds on this idea, "Recluses, by renouncing everything that society valued- power, honor, wealth and bodily ease- placed themselves beyond the reach of its judgment. At the same time, by incarnating other values which the world made a pretence of honoring, they stood as judges over it. They are rightly seen as hinge figures, able to look Janus-like in different directions, moving easily between social groupings with mutually conflicting interests. Recluses saw themselves, however, as hinge figures on the vertical plane between human and divine, time and eternity, and were similarly perceived by others." Pauline Matarasso, introduction to *The Life of Wulfric of Haselbury*, by John of Forde (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2011), 38. Peter Brown also describes the medieval holy man or holy woman as a "hinge-man" in his article, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* LXI (1971): 86.

¹⁸ It is important to note that the anchoress did not always get to choose her own anchorhold. Sometimes these were appointed by the bishop on the basis of availability. This was especially the case during the fourteenth century when anchoriticism seems to have reached its peak in popularity in England. Warren, 75-76.

denouncement and announcement gives anchoriticism its apostolic character. Yet, despite the potential for influencing others, it is important to note that the anchoress was not enclosed in order to convert people in her community. She was enclosed to prayerfully work out her own salvation. Any influence on the surrounding community was a secondary effect of her spirituality and not the primary aim.¹⁹

The central purpose of the anchorhold was to foster the anchoress's spiritual development, and the rich symbolism associated with these spaces conveys this intention. While metaphors for the anchorhold abound, the most prominent ones are those that describe the anchorhold as womb, tomb, desert and bridal chamber.

The womb imagery marked the space as one where the anchoress could grow spiritually and simultaneously portrayed the church as a mother within whom all the faithful are in utero. The belly of the church offered safety and solitude for the anchoress and sustained her with the substance of the mass until she was born anew.

The literary works of recluses suggest that the anchorhold was also a space that

¹⁹ Matarasso, 40. Pauline Matarasso states that community influence is not the anchorite's aim but the result of a life of devotion. I am extending her argument here by applying it to anchoresses but I do so with caution. There are some differences between how anchoresses and anchorites are perceived by the community. In medieval England, the anchorite was more of a spiritual master. After excelling as a monk, he was now taking an even bolder step in his move toward heaven. The anchoress, in contrast, is seen as a weaker figure who embarks on a radical, life-changing endeavor. The distinction between the two is more pronounced if the woman's former life is that of a layperson rather than that of a nun. Her venture is viewed with both awe and skepticism by the community and church officials are more wary about her ability to persevere. The Christina Carpenter story, a scandal involving a woman who leaves her anchorhold, is an infamous example of an anchoress gone wild. This story hangs in the shadows of any other anchoress' apparent success. So, even as the anchoress has a harder road to climb than the anchorite, the fruits of her success are exponentially greater as a result. Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Gender, Rhetoric and Space in the *Speculum Inclusorum*, *Letter to a Bury Recluse* and the Strange Case of Christina Carpenter," in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 111-126.

cultivated consciousness and voice. As a womb, the anchorhold pointed to the occupant's spiritual need rather than mastery. The stone walls were monuments for Christian humility and cautioned both the recluse and her neighbors not to think too highly of themselves. This humble devotion recalled Christ's willingness to become incarnate and elicit praise from the womb. Presumably, the anchoress' life in the womb would lead others to glorify God.

The anchorhold is also figured as a tomb. Entering the anchorhold is a response to Colossians 3: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."²⁰ This idea seems to undergird the opening line of Aelred of Rievaulx's discussion of the inner life for an anchoress, "But now, whoever you may be who have given up the world to choose this life of solitude, desiring to be hidden and unseen, to be dead as it were to the world and buried with Christ in his tomb, listen to my words and understand them."²¹ While life in the tomb provided a rather grisly reminder of the anchoress' mortality, it also prepared her for a holy death. Living within her tomb, the anchoress testified to the fragility of this life and to the risen Christ whose reign continues in the world to come.

The purgative dimensions of anchoritic life that undergird the tomb imagery also uphold the descriptions of the anchorhold as a desert. Just as Jesus is tempted in the desert, the anchoress will be tested by despair, lust, sloth, loneliness, anger, ingratitude, and a host of other threats to her soul.

²⁰ Colossians 3:2-3 NRSV.

²¹ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Treatises, The Pastoral Prayer* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 62.

The *Vita Liutbirga* provides a helpful example of the anchorhold as desert.²² This text focuses on the life of Liutbirga, a ninth-century anchoress, and chronicles her experience of testing. Struggle emerges as a central theme in Liutbirga's enclosed life and from the very start she expects to do "hand to hand combat" with a host of sins.²³ The magnitude of her testing is conveyed in the way various sins are figured as armies. For instance, torch-bearing soldiers make up the army of anger while the armies of gluttony and lust hold captives in bonds of pleasure.²⁴ A squadron symbolizing hypocrisy wears brightly colored clothing.²⁵ In order to survive, Liutbirga needs the full armor of God described by Paul in Ephesians 6.²⁶

Her actual encounters seem both constant and harrowing. The enemy comes in the guise of a former lover, a menacing child, a weird goat, a small dog with ferocious teeth, an invasion of mice (exterminated with holy water), and guilt from past sins (e.g., trading her broken embroidery needle with a friend's functioning needle).²⁷ She also faces despair from the rigorous demands of discernment and is tormented with frightening sounds.²⁸ Liutbirga fights back with scripture much in the vein of Jesus in Matthew 4, and also prays, feeds the poor, and sees to the care of the sick and imprisoned.²⁹ While the text does not say so directly, these acts of compassion seem

²² Frederick Paxton, *Anchoress and Abbess in 9th Century Saxony* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2009), 93.

²³ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 101-105.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

like ways to do battle as well. Ultimately, Liutbirga's testing equips her to advise others as they struggle in discernment.

Yet, if anchoritic life consisted only of constant combat it would be unbearable. In actuality, the desert seems to be equal parts hell and honeymoon. It holds a paradise of divine encounters with special treats for God's bride.³⁰ And male or female, the anchorite was the bride of Christ and the wilderness was the space dedicated to private union. Here, the anchorite beholds the beloved and is in turn beheld by God. The bedroom figures prominently in Julian's work. She is, after all, in bed and in the dark when she has her visions. She is extending anchoritic imagery to the church as a whole when she says God "rejoices that he is our father and God rejoices that he is our mother, and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and our soul his much-loved bride."³¹

Relationship with Community

An anchoress' relationship with the community was loaded with meaning. On one level, she has intentionally withdrawn from the community and is socially dead. On another level, she has become the resident holy woman. She was expected to intercede for the community continuously and be available as a spiritual advisor. In turn, the

³⁰ "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Jeremiah 2:2 NRSV. A similar theme is sounded in Hosea, "Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of Egypt." Hosea 2:14-15 NRSV.

³¹ Watson and Jenkins, 289; Spearing, 125.

community provided for the anchoress' necessities. People from all economic stations gave alms to the anchoress. Monarchs and aristocrats often gave substantial gifts to anchorites on an annual basis that might include money, fuel (wood), candles, clothing, and grain—usually barley or wheat.³² Since the anchoress was confined to her cell, she relied on these gifts and she would sometimes have to sue to enforce these gifts if the donor failed to keep his or her obligation.³³ While anchorites relied on gifts from the communities for their subsistence they usually also engaged in some kind of labor as well. For women, this labor might entail sewing or dying yarn, and men's labor might include copying or translating.³⁴ The anchorite's labor would often benefit the community and add yet another reason to respect the solitary vocation.

In part this respect from the community grew out of the sheer courage anchoriticism required. Anchorites lived austere lives of prayer, often limiting their speech to just a few hours a day.³⁵ Their lives were embodiments of Lent and focused continually on Christ's death and resurrection.³⁶ It is also important to note that this life of withdrawal, silence and prayer was deemed a sane life, the "sanest" of lifestyles according to Ann Warren in *Anchorites and their Patrons*.³⁷ The eccentric anchorite is a misleading construct.³⁸ Yet even the anchorite's contemporaries saw this vocation as

³² Warren, 127-185.

³³ Ibid., 44.

³⁴ Warren notes that Henry Mayr-Harting was something of a banker and that Joan of Blyth used her cell as a safe depository but these efforts were discouraged and rare. Ibid., 110-111.

³⁵ Aelred, 54.

³⁶ Ibid., 59.

³⁷ Warren, 2. She also notes that vocations of withdrawal are rarely studied and this leads to more exotic perceptions of anchorites.

³⁸ Licence, 2.

one that required radical devotion, and recluses were given a considerable amount of independence as a result.³⁹

With regard to the anchorite's relationship with the community, it is important to note that anchorites were not universally celebrated. They absorbed scorn much like the Hebrew prophets of old and were as vulnerable to criticism as their predecessors Elijah and John the Baptist. Richard Rolle, for example, is regularly insulted and described as "often without honor."⁴⁰ In a letter to Archbishop Stephen Langton dated 1215, Gerald of Wales praises prelates and accuses hermits and anchorites of self-indulgence:

The former feed, the latter two are fed. The former restore, with heavy interest, the talent entrusted by God: the latter, in a way, conceal the talent entrusted—intent on little more than their own salvation. . . . Though therefore the contemplative life be securer and much more tranquil, as you know, far more useful is that (life) which is active- far more strenuous also and glorious: many does it perfect for salvation: much gain is produced by it for Christ.⁴¹

Gerald of Wales sees the solitary as little more than a leech, feeding off Christ's flock. Rather than actively caring for parishioners, the anchorite is imagined as self-serving. This charge of hypocrisy seems to parallel the kind of criticism preachers receive from their audiences during this period. Indeed, if there were no such criticism one would wonder how effectively the anchoress proclaimed the gospel. Whether drawing

³⁹ In practice it seems the anchorites usually deferred to the king and to the bishop, but consider Christopher Warner in Ann Warren's *Anchorites and their Patrons*. Warner defies a royal summons and asserts his need to be in continuous prayer. Warren, 121.

⁴⁰ Clay, 161; Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4.

⁴¹ Francis D. S. Darwin, *The English Medieval Recluse* (London: SPCK, 1944), 83-84, quoted in Jantzen, 45.

criticism or affirmation, it appears the anchorite's provocative influence continued until the practice curbed after the dissolution.

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Biography

Donyelle Charlotte McCray was born in Atlanta, Georgia and attended DeKalb County Public Schools. She earned an Honors Program Scholarship to Spelman College, where she majored in English and graduated in 1996, *magna cum laude*. After Spelman, Donyelle attended Harvard Law School and served in the Harvard Mediation Program and provided *pro bono* legal services at the Hale & Dorr Legal Services Center. Donyelle graduated from Harvard Law School in 1999 and began practicing law with the tax group at Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan LLP in Washington, DC.

A growing interest in biblical studies and ecclesiology led Donyelle to pursue theological studies at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA. After graduating with an M.Div. in 2006, she served as a hospice chaplain providing support to dying patients and their families in the Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD metropolitan areas.

Relationships with hospice patients and their families stirred an interest in Christian consolation and prompted her enrollment in Duke Divinity School's Doctor of Theology program. While at Duke, Donyelle has received the Bell-Woolfall Fellowship and the James H. Costen North American Doctoral Fellowship from the Forum for Theological Exploration (formerly Fund for Theological Education). She also served as Virginia Theological Seminary's Martha J. Horne Visiting Professor for 2012-2013 before joining the faculty on a full-time basis.

